

**ADULT CHILDREN OF COVERTLY NARCISSISTIC FAMILIES:
A LOOK AT THEIR ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

by

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ABSTRACT

The narcissistic family is a term coined to describe a pattern of interaction existing within a family in which the needs of the parents take precedence over the needs of the children. The term narcissist is used not as a clinical diagnosis of the parents, but rather in a descriptive sense. Familiarity with the clinical use of the term was deemed necessary for understanding the descriptive meaning. Two types of narcissistic families exist; overt and covert. Overtly narcissistic families include those in which the parents' needs take precedence due to overt reasons, such as drug and alcohol abuse or psychiatric illness. Much empirical literature exists on this subject. Covertly narcissistic families include those in which the parents' needs take precedence due to covert reasons, such as parental low self-esteem or lack of identity. The existing research on the covertly narcissistic family is purely anecdotal, none of it focusing on the romantic experiences of survivors. Therefore it was the aim of this study to explore the romantic experiences of adult children of covertly narcissistic families, with the hopes of finding common themes among participants and uncovering their feelings and experiences on a deeper and richer level. A research interview was conducted using open-ended questions to determine the experiences of romantic relationships for six participants. A qualitative content analysis was used to identify categories and themes within the interview transcripts. The study yielded five common themes; insecurity in relationships; difficulty with intimacy; unrealistic expectations; negative/precarious sense of self; and repeating unhealthy family of origin dynamics. Each theme was further broken down into three categories. Consistent with anecdotal and research findings on the narcissistic family, on romantic

love, and on the effects of childhood covert abuse, results indicated that adults who emerged from these families indeed struggled with basic trust and intimacy issues which affected their ability to have and maintain fulfilling romantic relationships. The results also uncovered the depth and richness that exist within the experience of these individuals. Suggestions for counselling were based on a need for the field to familiarize itself with the particular struggles of this understudied group.

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“Whatever you think you can do or dream you can do, begin it.”

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CHAPTER 1

Divorce statistics remain dire. In the United States the chance of a first marriage ending in divorce over a forty-year period is 67 percent. Half of all divorces will occur in the first seven years. Some studies find the divorce rate for second marriages is as much as 10 percent higher than for first-timers (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Canada too has one of the highest divorce rates in the world. In 1998, there were 153,380 marriages across the country; the same year the number of couples divorcing was estimated at 69,088 (Statistics Canada, 1998).

Meissner (1978) observed that the capacity to successfully function as a spouse is largely a consequence of the spouse's childhood relationships to his or her own parents. The relative success that romantic partners experience, as well as the manner in which they approach and accomplish developmental tasks through life, is largely determined by the extent to which they are free from excessive negative attachments to the past. Chronic conflicts derived from one's family of origin continue to be acted out or replicated with current intimates (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996).

According to advocates of the object relations view, two individuals engaged in an intimate relationship each bring to the relationship a separate and unique psychological heritage. Each carries a personal history, a unique personality, and a set of hidden, internalized objects into all transactions with one another. Inevitably, the romantic relationship bears some resemblance to the parent-child relationships experienced in their own families of origin (Meissner, 1978).

Marriage has been described as one of the most significant of all human developmental experiences. Those marriages or relationships which are burdened by

unresolved or partially resolved developmental conflicts (i.e; separation/individuation) from childhood often carry over into the marriage or relationship, and can create tension and difficulties. Individuals in this type of relationship may be looking to find gratification in relationship for which a relationship is an inappropriate vehicle (Meissner, 1978). Where separation has been less than successful so that the individuation and differentiation of self remain fragile, the entrance into a new relationship will carry with it the residues of old attachments and will introduce into the new relationship the unresolved residues which are carried over from old relationships. The need then is for intimate partners to develop a sense of self that is both more differentiated and internally integrated (Meissner, 1978).

For an intimate relationship to be enjoyable, both partners must be able to depend on and trust one another. If both have learned that to depend on another does not lead to envelopment or abandonment, then there is a strong likelihood that they can give and take in a relatively conflict-free atmosphere. On the other hand, if they experienced their primary care giver as ambivalent, inconsistent, frustrating, or unloving, they will tend to view their partner the same way (Stearns, 1985).

Links between the experiences of childhood and their often permanent effect on adult behavior have long fascinated observers of human behavior. Of particular interest has been the impact of one's family of origin on personal development. Harrington and Metzler, (1997) stated that "dysfunction in the family of origin may affect several domains of an individual's life, two of which are problem solving communication and global distress in intimate relationships" (p.106). Global distress in intimate relationships may include difficulties with all facets of intimacy including commitment,

communication, and trust. Both traditional wisdom and psychological theories from Freud to Rogers suggest that the interactions of parents with their children are among the major determinants of adult character and personality (McCrae & Costa, 1988).

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) found that in the last decade, the concept of the adult child of alcoholic parents (ACOA) has helped the world to understand the nearly predictable effects of being raised in an alcoholic family system. They believe that therapists have worked for years with individuals suffering from what appeared to be permanent low self-esteem, difficulty sustaining intimacy, and/or blocked paths to self-understanding. However, another population has recently emerged. These are the individuals who had the traits of an ACOA but whose parents did not drink, rape or beat them. Indeed there was dysfunction in the family, but the common thread was elusive; there was no overt abuse. Within this population common behavioral traits were found: a chronic need to please; an inability to identify feelings, wants and needs, and a need for constant validation. These people feel that the bad things that happen to them are well deserved, while the good things that happen to them are accidental. They have trouble being assertive, but feel like paper tigers--often very angry, but easily beaten down. In relationships, these individuals frequently find themselves in dead-end situations. All of these individuals however share a common past. As children, the emotional needs of their parents took precedence over their own emotional needs. In response, these individuals were often responsible for meeting their parents' emotional demands. This group of individuals has been called adult children of narcissistic families (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

The term narcissistic family is not used as a clinical diagnosis of the parental system; that is, it is not about individuals who suffer from narcissistic personality disorder. This term is employed in more of a descriptive and less of a clinical sense, although a basic understanding of the theories of narcissism is essential to understanding this terminology. Kernberg (1975) and Freud (1953-1974) saw narcissism as a personality disorder, while Kohut (1977) explained it as more of a normal developmental process that can go awry in early childhood given a lack of parental mirroring and acceptance. Narcissism implies self-absorption, lack of genuine caring, a certain superficiality, and an unwillingness to get too close or give too much. Any or all of these descriptions can be used to describe the parental system in a narcissistic family. One pervasive trait that exists in all narcissistic families is that the needs of the parent system take precedence over the needs of the children. The children in such a family must be reactive to the needs of the parent, rather than the contrary. As a result, these children often experience a range of problems in adulthood. They are often out of touch with their feelings, have trust and boundary issues, and often put the needs of others ahead of their own, while all along feeling intense rage and anger because no one is attending to their needs (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

Narcissistic families have been broken down into two types; overt and covert. Families dealing with drug and alcohol abuse or incestuous and assaultive behaviors are all types of behaviors that can be found in overtly narcissistic families (Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman, 1994). Much literature exists on these types of families and the effects they have on the adult children (Guinta & Compas, 1994, Harrington & Metzler, 1997, Smith, 1996). The covertly narcissistic family is harder to recognize as the

dysfunctional behaviors are more difficult to see. The covertly narcissistic family is one in which the needs of the parent system take precedence over the needs of the children for more covert reasons. This family looks fine on the outside, in that there is no overt abuse (i.e. alcoholism, sexual/physical abuse). However, on the inside, the needs of the children are not being met due to the fact that many of these parents have had poor parenting themselves or suffer from poor self-esteem and identity issues. This may leave them with pressing needs for nurturance, support, and recognition from others, including their own children (Jurkovic, 1997). From this family, it is apparent that the needs of the parents are the focus of the family, and that the children are expected to meet these needs. A parent who feels compelled to transform his/her child into a genius to show the world what a wonderful parent he/she must be in order to have such a gifted child is one such example (Elkind, 1991). This parent is preoccupied with dealing with his/her own sense of importance and social ranking instead of dealing with what could actually be in the best interest of the child, promoting that child's personal growth and healthy development.

With regards to overtly narcissistic families it has been assumed however that it is not the particular substance abuse, parental illness, or source of dysfunction per se that constitutes a risk for later adjustment difficulties. Rather, it is the accompanying lack of parental emotional availability and the parents' failure to respond to critical childhood needs, whatever the original source, that leads to developmental problems (Hadley, Holoway & Mallinckrodt, 1993). Hadley et al. (1993) state that

There is a growing literature based on clinical impressions that suggests that an adult whose parents displayed other dysfunctional characteristics but were not addicted to alcohol have similar pathology to adults who were raised in a home in

which one or both parents were chemically dependent. It follows that the pattern of problems identified by ACA's, particularly the difficulties with self and relational disorders may be due to general dysfunctional family characteristics (p.349).

Much empirical research exists that has examined the effects of the overtly narcissistic family (alcoholism, sexual abuse) on its adult offspring with respect to character formation and their experiences of romantic relationships (Harrington & Metzler, 1997; McCarthy, 1990; Mothersead, Kivlighan, & Wynkoop, 1998; Smith, 1996). However, no research exists regarding the experiences of adult survivors of covertly narcissistic families, and no qualitative or quantitative research was found dealing with their experiences of romantic relationships. This study will examine the romantic relationships of adult children of covertly narcissistic families. My research question then is, **What is the experience of romantic relationships for adult children of covertly narcissistic families?** A qualitative content analysis (Berg, 1998) was used to code the transcribed interviews of six research participants. Common themes emerged to illuminate the lived experience of this understudied group.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In Greek mythology, the handsome youth Narcissus wanders the world, refusing romantic offers from a variety of eligible others, none of which he deems worthy of his love. Eventually, he finds himself in a dark wood staring into a pool of water. It is here that he discovers the face of the person he loves staring back at him. The person he so adores is himself. Narcissus's attraction freezes him on the spot; he dies, and eventually turns into a flower (Campbell, 1999). Ovid has another telling of the myth. In this version, Narcissus was the product of a rape. His mother, Liriope, a water-lady, was raped in a brook and nearly drowned. When Liriope asks a prophet about what her son's future will hold, and if he will live to old age, he answers, "If he ne'er know himself." Narcissus, though physically beautiful and desired by many (of both sexes) remained aloof. He is loved and admired, especially by the tragic Echo, but he does not love or admire in return. At last, of course, he does find an object worthy of his love-his own reflection in a pool of water. He thus comes to "know himself," which results in his death. What remains is a beautiful white flower (the narcissus) that springs up beside the pool and is perpetually reflected in its waters (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994). The disdain for others and the barren and excessive love of the self may be considered the two visible markers of narcissism (Cohen, 1998).

There are many elements of this myth which have found their way into psychological studies and models: the story of Narcissus symbolically includes the perils of physical beauty, the pool as a mirror, rape, self-love, skewed self-esteem, homosexual love, the role of empathy, water as life/death and self-knowledge as death. The symbolic

representation of Echo has been taken to represent reactive personality, and an impaired sense of self. Perhaps more than any other mythological character, Narcissus has fascinated students of human behavior by dramatizing a host of characterologic dualities: passion/coldness, aloofness/absorption, reality/illusion, insight/concreteness, unity/disunity, subject/object, and demanding/rejecting love. The term narcissistic personality has been used with an astonishing variety of meanings, ranging from a sexual perversion to a concentration of psychological interest upon the self. (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

The diagnostic picture of narcissism is both complex and ambiguous. Clinically, narcissism has come to signify an ever-broadening variety of psychopathological phenomena. Both a diagnostic spread and an increase in the frequency of its use characterize the nosology of the so-called narcissistic personality. Further, this term is used by different theorists with different diagnostic implications or to refer to clinically different phenomena (Fiscalini & Grey, 1993).

Proponents of Narcissism

Freud

Freud (1914/1957) distinguished between anaclitic (attachment) type individuals and narcissistic type individuals. The anaclitic type directs his or her love outward, the first object of that love being mother and father. Later, love objects are substitutes for the parents, hence the classic notion of marrying one's parent. On the contrary, the narcissistic type directs his or her love inward. According to Freud, the love object becomes either what one is, what one was, or what one would like to be. Freud clearly implicates the role of the self in narcissistic object choice (Campbell, 1999). In Freudian

terms, healthy object relationships are of the attachment type, while unhealthy ones are narcissistic. Primary narcissism, exists in an infant who knows no object other than the self and who cannot differentiate between ego and id. This is a natural, transitory state. Secondary (or pathological) narcissism occurs when the libido is withdrawn from external objects and reinvested in its own ego (the self) (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

Freud believed that at first the infant is preoccupied with its own pleasurable sensations: a primitive form of self-love, which is unmediated by concepts of self and other. Once we are able to form an idea of our self, we automatically represent ourselves in the most flattering way imaginable. Self gets equated with everything that provides enjoyment, and 'not-self' subsumes everything painful or indifferent. Learning to love means giving up this illusion of personal perfection and thereby accepting the fact of one's dependence upon others. One is narcissistic to the extent that one's self-representations encompass only those things that yield pleasure. The capacity to love is built on the capacity to find the 'bad' in oneself and the 'good' in others. Sometimes narcissism is understood positively as the infatuation with one's own self image. At other points, however, it is understood negatively as the absence of love for others (Cooper & Maxwell, 1995).

In looking at the primary narcissism of children, again within a normal nonpathological context, Freud (1957) takes a leap from the child's narcissistic crisis in transferring object love (from self to others), to the parent's narcissistic crisis in raising the child. He believed that parental love was nothing more than the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object love, unmistakably revealed its former nature.

Freud spoke of all parents and all developmental stages of parenting as if they were all the same. We know that they are not. As children develop in stages, so do parents. As the child will hopefully move out of the stage of primary narcissism, so will a healthy parent system "get a grip" on its identification with the child and not live vicariously through him or her. When they are not able to do this, a narcissistic family system may develop. Although Freud's work on narcissism was by no means his most well researched or documented effort, it is the basis on all other theories on narcissism (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994). At the start of our career as people, we have no concepts of 'me' and 'you'-- we can experience states of sensual enjoyment, but cannot love ourselves or others. Once we begin to form concepts of 'me' and 'you' we fill these in tententiously: everything good is 'me', everything that is not good is 'not-me'. In effect we confuse self and other. It is only to the extent that we are able to draw the line between self and other realistically that we are able to love (Cooper & Maxwell, 1995).

Kohut

It was Heinz Kohut who, in 1968, coined the term "narcissistic personality disorder," and it was the popularity of his ideas on narcissism that gave the initial impetus to its rapid rise in diagnostic use (Fiscalini & Grey, 1993). Kohut's self-psychology theory has some similarities to object-relations theory. Kohut proposed that narcissism was not just a defect in personality but was an integral part of normal development and that there was age and stage appropriate narcissism. This perspective marked a departure from the usual pathological perception of narcissism. It is this change in perspective that allowed a definition of healthy narcissism for adults to emerge. Kohut believed that

narcissism was a life-long process that undergoes many changes, and in adults healthy narcissism expresses itself by humor, empathy and wisdom (Brown, 1998).

Brown (1998) also states that Kohut describes the development of the self as first perceived as emerging from relations with others as an infant. The quality of nurturing received, especially empathic attention to needs, is the fertile ground for the rudimentary self to develop. The needs must be satisfied and the inner world of the infant must be empathically understood. The infant's world must consist of empathy and mirroring. The idealized parent image is also present in the rudimentary self of the infant. This image is first experienced as 'selfobject'. A 'selfobject' is a person or object that by its action satisfies needs. So, the parent, or 'selfobject', satisfies the infant's needs, and the extent to which they can empathically do so promotes the development of the idealized parent image. The rudimentary self of the infant is fused with the idealized parent image, and there is no distinction between "me" and "not-me." The cohesive self develops from relationships with 'selfobjects'. The degree to which 'selfobjects' satisfy needs, including the need to be admired and approved of unconditionally, determines the extent to which a cohesive self develops. The quality of the empathic and mirroring relationship with the nurturer is considered to be the most important component.

In 1977, Kohut set forth his theory of self-psychology. Briefly, the child's narcissistic bliss is necessarily cut short by the child's own development and the mother's decreasing availability to meet its every need. Therefore, the child attempts to hold on to this narcissistic bliss by assigning to it (1) a grandiose and exhibitionistic image (the narcissistic self), and (2) an imagined, idealized parent image- the completely devoted, all- powerful fantasy parent. If all goes properly, the grandiose and exhibitionistic self

will become tamed and integrated over time into the adult personality, capable of meeting its ego-syntonic needs and accomplishing its purposes. Further, if all goes well, the idealized parent image becomes integrated into the adult personality in the form of values and ideals. If, however, the child suffers some narcissistic trauma, the grandiose self never becomes integrated, instead perpetuating itself and striving for its primitive-level satisfaction. Similarly, if a child suffers phase-inappropriate disappointments from its primary caregiver, the idealized parent image is also retained intact, and the adult must search endlessly for a primitive transitional object to cling to for support, safety and validation (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994). Kohut felt that the mirroring of the child's perception of him or herself by parents is one element of building healthy narcissism. The parent who approves of and delights in the child is mirroring the child's perception of self, that is, "I am lovable," and conveys this through word and deed (Brown, 1998). The development of pathological forms of narcissism is largely dependent upon the actual failures of the environment to provide appropriate empathic responses to the infant's needs. For healthy development to occur, the primary caregiver must be empathically responsive to the infant's need for admiration (mirroring) and to the later need to idealize the parent. Empathic failures result in a developmental arrest with fixation remaining at primitive levels of grandiosity and idealization. The arrest of self-development can interfere with joyous expression and prevent the development of creativity (Morrison, 1986).

The narcissistically disordered person, according to Kohut, has had insufficient or inadequate self-object experience, and has consequently developed a frail self (Cooper & Maxwell, 1995). When describing his patients, Kohut often emphasized the lack of

genuine enthusiasm and joy, the sense of deadness and boredom, and the frequency of perverse activities. Typically this individual's sense of self-organization is liable to fragmentation under conditions of stress. Those aspects of what are labeled the mirror transference reveal primitive needs for being noticed, admired, and approved in one's grandiose aspirations. Narcissists are unable to separate themselves from others, as are complementary personalities. This is seen as the narcissistic object choice- a reflection or extension of the narcissist, him/herself, with little ability to respect the object as a person in his/her own right (Morrison, 1986).

The most salient feature of the narcissist's dealings with others is a marked lack of empathy, as shown in an unwillingness (or inability) to recognize or identify with other people's feelings and needs. To make him/herself feel worthwhile, the narcissist requires and solicits excessive and constant admiration. He or she may assume an arrogant, haughty attitude and behaviors to show he is better than others are, and demonstrate a sense of entitlement. His scorn for and minimization of other's efforts, abilities, and concerns serves a similar function (Cohen, 1998). Profoundly angry reactions are characteristic of these individuals, as Kohut describes the concept of narcissistic rage, the reaction to an injury to self-esteem. Its central features are the need for revenge-the undoing of hurt by whatever means- and compulsion in this pursuit, with utter disregard for reasonable limitations (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982).

Kernberg

The most notable student of object-relations theory with regard to the psychoanalytic study of narcissism is Otto Kernberg. Kernberg (1975) classifies the narcissistic personality as a subgroup of borderline disorder. He sees both normal and

pathological narcissism and notes the difference between the two as the ability for object relationships. He characterizes narcissists as excessively self-absorbed, intensely ambitious, lacking in empathy, grandiose, having an excessive need for praise and tribute from others, and unconcerned with the comfort of others except on the most superficial level. They experience pleasure only in the presence of admiration, and they quickly become bored in its absence (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

Kernberg (1975) discusses a type of rage exhibited by narcissists that is revengeful and compulsive; a driving need to pay back another for some insult or slight that threatens the narcissist's well defended persona. He discusses three levels of narcissism. The first, are successful and gifted enough individuals that they manage to receive all the admiration they require, and so they may never enter therapy. The second are marginally successful but often seek treatment because of difficulty in maintaining long-term relationships or general feelings of aimlessness and dissatisfaction. The third group are those who are probably diagnosed with borderline personality disorder; they function clearly on a borderline level and manifest severe problems in the areas of impulse control, anxiety tolerance, and sublimation. These narcissists also evidence paranoid traits, believing others to be always lurking, waiting for opportunities to persecute them (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

Kernberg (1975) describes narcissistic personalities as being excessively absorbed with themselves and generally full of superficial social expertise. He claims that they present in therapy with varying degrees and combinations of: (a) extreme ambitions, (b) grandiose fantasies of wealth; power and prestige, (c) an intense need for admiration and acclaim from others, (d) serious inability to form and maintain meaningful relationships,

(e) a hidden sense of inferiority, (f) incapacity to love and care for others, and (g) a lack of empathy and profound feelings of boredom and emptiness. Kernberg claims that these people have usually demonstrated ruthlessness toward others in striving to get what they want or feel entitled to, and they usually exploit others, have intense envy constantly and are uncertain and dissatisfied with themselves. Some behaviors, attitudes and feelings identified by Kernberg as indicative of the narcissistic personality are: grandiose fantasies that are designed to insure that they remain the center of attention at all times, attempts to control others that carry an air of anger; overreaction to criticism and blame (they strive to be perceived as perfect as this is how they see themselves, and any suggestion that they are less than perfect is met with outrage); and demanding that they be given everything that they need or want but never being satisfied. Contempt and devaluation of the other person mark most of their relationships. According to Brown (1998) the desire to have others envy them is intense.

Kernberg (1975) sees pathological narcissism in terms of a pathological fusion of ideal self, ideal object, and actual self-images. He admits that it is hard to understand what brings about such a pathological formation and questions the role of constitutional factors. He clearly points to an increased development of oral aggression in narcissistic patients. Kernberg (1975) cites the presence of a chronically cold parental figure with covert but intense aggression as being consistent with the disorder. The intense oral frustration and aggression engendered in the child make it necessary to defend against the felt extreme hatred, envy and dependency needs (Imbesi, 1999).

Both Kohut and Kernberg in fact locate the roots of pathological narcissism in the earliest years of life and attribute it to the primary caregiver's failure to respond

adequately to the infant's normal narcissistic needs for mirroring and admiration. Both regard it as a disorder of the self (Cohen, 1998). All the theorists emphasize lack of self-knowledge and fragile sense of self (Cooper & Maxwell, 1995).

Kernberg posits that the narcissistic individual as a child was left emotionally hungry by a chronically cold, unempathic mother. (Nowadays, as the times have changed, a more accurate term to encompass and describe this role would be the gender-free primary care giver. However, at the time of Kernberg's writings it was predominantly the mother who stayed at home with the children, hence the assumed female gender appears in his writings, and it was all too often the mother who was blamed for the children's problems, the father was mysteriously absent). Feeling unloved and "bad," the child projected his rage onto his parents, who were then perceived as even more sadistic and depriving. Kernberg contends that the child's sole defense then was to take refuge in some aspect of himself that his parents, particularly his mother, valued. Thus the grandiose self was born. This self is formed by fusion of the admired aspects of the child, the fantasied version of himself that compensated for frustration and defended against rage and envy, and the fantasied image of a loving mother. The unacceptable image of oneself as a hungry infant is dissociated or split off from the main functioning self, although an experienced eye can spot it behind the boredom, emptiness, and chronic hunger for excitement and acclaim (Akhtar & Thomson, 1982).

DSM-IV

The DSM-IV (APA, 1994) definition of narcissism will now be explored. As narcissism is understood today, the narcissist's major external quality, his sense of grandiose self-importance, compensates for a deficient self-concept and extremely

painful vulnerability. The DSM-IV (APA, 1994) places the dividing line between healthy narcissism and narcissistic disorder at the point where the narcissistic qualities interfere with the individual's relationships (Cohen, 1998). Central to the idea of a destructive pattern are the notions that the individual has not developed in expected ways, has encountered failures in adequate psychological nurturing early in life, and may not have received sufficient confirmation of self that would promote the development of healthy narcissism. These notions are all derived from object-relations and self-psychology theories (Brown, 1998).

Pathological narcissism is described in the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) as the Narcissistic Personality Disorder. The diagnosed individual has a pattern of fantasized or behavioral grandiosity, an intense need for admiration and demonstrable lack of empathy. In addition, five or more of the following characteristics are present: unrealistic, inflated sense of self-importance; preoccupation with consistent fantasies of unlimited wealth, power, beauty, success etc.; considers self to be unique and special and can only be understood or should only associate with other special or high-status people; seeks excessive admiration; feels entitled to special treatment; exploits others; lacks empathy; is envious of others or thinks others are envious of him or her; and arrogant, haughty and aloof in behavior or attitudes (Brown, 1998).

Attachment Theory

In recent years, a growing number of researchers have become interested in the processes by which people develop, maintain, and dissolve emotional bonds within close relationships. John Bowlby (1969) began empirical research in this area by studying how and why infants become emotionally attached to their primary caregivers and why they

often experience emotional distress when physically separated from them. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) identified a clear sequence of three emotional options that typically occur following the separation of an infant from its mother: protest, despair and detachment. Bowlby argued that an attachment system composed of specific behavioral and emotional tendencies to keep infants in close contact with caregivers who could protect them from danger and predation, infants who possessed these attachment tendencies who have been more likely to survive and procreate (Simpson, 1990).

Empirical research examining tenets of Bowlby's theory has focused mainly on different styles or patterns of attachment: anxious/ambivalent, avoidant, and secure. During social development, people presumably construct internal affective/ cognitive models both of themselves and typical interaction patterns with significant others. These mental models are thought to organize the development of personality and to guide subsequent social behavior. People who exhibit a secure attachment style tend to develop mental models of themselves as being friendly, good-natured, and likeable and of significant others as being generally reliable and trustworthy. Those who possess an anxious style tend to develop a model of themselves as being misunderstood, lacking in confidence and underappreciated and of significant others as being unreliable and unwilling or unable to commit to permanent relationships. Finally, those people who have an avoidant attachment style typically see themselves as being suspicious, aloof and skeptical and of significant others as being unreliable. A growing body of empirical research has documented the existence of these mental models in adults (Simpson, 1990).

Bowlby believed that two crucial elements had to be present in the parenting style in order to create positive childhood bonds, and later healthy adult personality

development. First, the parents had to freely express emotional warmth and affection while also being consistently responsive to the child's needs. This type of parenting style helps a child to feel valued and secure. Secondly, parents had to encourage the child to use this basis of emotional security to explore the environment, thereby gaining more and more independence (Mallinckrodt, 1991).

Attachment theory posits that the emotional responsiveness of caregivers promotes a sense of emotional comfort and security in the growing infant. Bowlby asserted that the degree of responsiveness and emotional availability of caregivers are crucial to the formation of the child's beliefs about the self and the social world. Interactions with caregivers influence the development of mental representations, termed working models by Bowlby, which include internal representations of the self as worthy of care and support and representations of the attachment figure as someone who is responsive and caring. Although they differ regarding the specifics, theorists from object relations, self psychology, and attachment perspectives believe that the emotional responsiveness of caregivers, particularly in the first years of life, is crucial to the development of a healthy adult personality (Hadley et al., 1993). As Hazan and Shaver (1987) report, Bowlby believed that attachment behavior characterizes human beings from the cradle to the grave. Proponents of attachment theory argue that maternal and paternal sensitivity and responsiveness to children's signals of distress is critical to children's developing sense of self-worth and to their emerging capacity to regulate their own distress (Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996).

Attachment theory holds that working models are carried forward to form the basis for adult beliefs about the self and others. Therefore the consistency of attachment

figures' responses to the child's emotional needs may have far-reaching consequences for adult functioning. Secure attachment patterns in childhood have been related to security in adult romantic relationships and to lower adult levels of hostility and improved ability to regulate negative affect. Adults who described their parents as being warm and accepting reported more willingness to depend on others to meet their emotional needs and were less anxious about being abandoned in relationships. Those who described their parents as cold and or inconsistent had lower self-worth and social confidence. The base rate at which caregivers express affection or provide nurturance to a child may not be as crucial as their contingent responding to the child's expressed needs (Mallinckrodt, 1991).

Although attachment theory does not address narcissism directly, it is clear that failure to respond to a child's needs, or insecure attachment patterns in childhood would later affect functioning in the adult.

Romantic Love

Research in the late 1980's and early 1990's has suggested that adult attachment style, an orientation to relationships thought to be determined by childhood relationships with parents, affects the experience of romantic love (Brennan and Shaver, 1995).

In 1987, Hazan and Shaver examined whether variations in early social experiences produced relatively enduring differences in relationship styles. They proposed that romantic love is an attachment process, a process of becoming emotionally attached to an adult romantic partner in somewhat the same way that an infant becomes attached or emotionally bonded to its primary care giver. They had 620 subjects (415 women and 205 men) answer a relationship questionnaire, a status of current relationship

questionnaire, and a questionnaire regarding their attachment style and history. It was discovered that the best predictor of adult attachment style was the subjects' perceptions of the quality of relationships with their parents and the parent to parent relationships. Attachment styles develop in infancy and childhood and it is these styles that lead to later differences in romantic relationships.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) also discovered that the same three attachment styles described in infant literature were manifested in adult love relationships; that is secure, avoidant and anxious-ambivalent. The anxious-ambivalent style is characteristic of infants who intermix attachment behaviors with overt expressions of protest and anger toward the primary care giver when distressed, and avoidant style is characteristic of infants who avoid the caregiver and exhibit signs of detachment when distressed. The secure infant is the one who successfully uses the caregiver as a secure base when distressed. These styles can color the ways in which adults experience romantic love and behave in romantic relationships. They discovered that romantic love is experienced differently by different people because of variations in attachment histories. It was discovered that adults with different attachment styles experienced their most important love relationships differently. Secure adults, that is adults whose childhood attachment styles were secure saw partners as trustworthy friends. Those subjects who grew up with anxious attachment styles were more likely to fall in love at first sight, then long intensely for reciprocation, bordering on obsession. It was found that subjects who experienced avoidant attachment styles were least likely to accept their partners' faults, had fear of intimacy, jealousy and most emotional ups and downs. It would have been quite interesting however to have elaborated on this research in a more qualitative

fashion, that is to have discovered exactly how it felt and what the experiences were of these anxious and avoidant types.

Feeney and Noller (1990) studied whether it was possible to use attachment style as a predictor of adult love relationships. Three hundred and seventy four undergraduates completed love addiction questionnaires, Rubin's Love Scale (Rubin, 1973), Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986), Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967), and attachment style and history questionnaires (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The secure subjects, those who had positive family relationships trusted the most. The anxious types, that is those subjects who had experienced low parental support were the most dependent on commitment and partners. The avoidant types experienced high levels of mistrust and were the most distanced from others. This suggests that early attachment style is likely to exert a very pervasive influence on the individual's relationships with others, because it reflects general views about the rewards and dangers of interpersonal relationships. It is possible, however, that this influence may be especially salient in the context of intimate relationships (p. 287).

In 1990, Simpson sought to determine whether different attachment styles might precipitate different levels of interdependence and commitment. One hundred and forty four dating couples were studied longitudinally. During phase 1, participants responded to a series of measures that served as indicators of the amount of trust, interdependence, commitment, and satisfaction that existed in their current relationship. Six months later, as part of phase 2, couples were contacted by telephone to determine whether they were still dating and, if not, how much emotional distress each partner experienced following the breakup. It was found that those people who manifested a secure attachment style had

relationships characterized by more frequent occurrences of positive emotion, whereas those who displayed anxious and avoidant styles experienced more frequent occurrences of negative emotion. Also, highly avoidant men tended to experience less prolonged and intense emotional distress following relationship termination.

In a recent study examining the romantic preferences of narcissists, (Campbell, 1999), it was discovered that narcissists were more attracted to self-oriented targets and admiring others, preferring perfect to caring partners. They also tended to get involved in relationships that lacked intimacy. It would be interesting to examine the relationships of adult children of narcissistically oriented parents, to determine any dating differences.

The Narcissistic Family

In the next section of this literature review I will discuss the pertinent literature on the narcissistic family system which is different from individuals who suffer from narcissistic personality disorder. The term narcissistic is used here in more of a descriptive sense rather than in a clinical sense. The parent in the family has not been clinically categorized as a narcissist, but rather the focus on his/her needs, his/her feelings, his/her wants take precedence over the needs, wants and feelings of the children. The parent sees only him/herself and fails to see the children. The parent sees his/her needs as being more important than anyone else's. As noted earlier in this literature review, narcissism implies self-absorption, lack of genuine caring, a certain superficiality, concern with external appearances, shallowness and distancing-- an unwillingness to get too close or give too much. Any or all of these descriptions in varying degrees and with varying frequencies could be used to describe the parent system in a narcissistic family. Individuals in this narcissistic family system are not being categorized as pathological

narcissists; nonetheless, the definition of the system itself has parallels with the psychoanalytic framework that defines narcissism. An appreciation for the psychoanalytic historical basis of the narcissistic family model contributes to a better understanding of the theory (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

Narcissistic Family Description

It is posited that one pervasive trait exists in all families with a narcissistic parent system: the needs of the parent system take precedence over the needs of the children. The needs of the children are not only secondary to those of the parents, but are often seriously problematic for the latter. If we were to track the narcissistic family on any of the well-known developmental scales, we would see that the most fundamental needs of the child, those of safety and trust are not met. Furthermore, the responsibility of needs fulfillment shifts from the parent to the child. In this family system, the child must be reactive to the needs of the parent, rather than the opposite. In fact, the narcissistic family is consumed with dealing with the emotional needs of the parent system (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) explain that in the narcissistic family, the child's behavior is evaluated not in terms of what it says about what he or she may be feeling or experiencing, but rather in terms of its impact on the parent system. For example, in a healthy family, a child's receiving an 'F' on a report card alerts the parents to the presence of a problem. The situation is then examined in terms of the child's needs and development: is the work too hard, is the child under stress, does he or she need help, tutoring? In the narcissistic family though, the same problem is examined on the basis of difficulty presented for the parent: is the child disobedient, lazy, embarrassing, or just

looking for attention? In this family, the reactions of the parent(s) indicate that the child's feelings are of limited or no importance. The child does not have a problem; the child is a problem. The consequences of the child's actions for the parent(s) are of primary importance.

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) claim that over time, these children learn that their feelings are of little or negative value. They begin to detach from their feelings and lose touch with them. This denial of feelings is actually a survival mechanism for the child; to express them would only make the situation worse. Instead of understanding, recognizing and validating their own needs, these children develop an exaggerated sense of their impact on the needs of their parents. They soon become the reflection of their parents' emotional needs. The needs of the parent become like a moving target on which the child struggles to hit. Because they feel responsible for correcting the situation without having the proper power and control to do so, these children soon develop a sense of failure. Along with this, they never really learn how to validate their own feelings and meet their own needs. As adults, these people may not know what they feel, except for varying degrees of frustration, hopelessness and discontentment (Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman, 1994).

Earlier on, the story of Narcissus was presented. In terms of the narcissistic family, Narcissus represents the parent system, which, for whatever reason be it overt or covert (job stress, alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness, physical disability, lack of parenting skills), is primarily interested in getting its own needs met. Echo is the child, trying to gain attention and approval by becoming a reactive reflection of the parents' needs, thus never developing the ability to find his/her own 'voice'-- that is to see and

understand his/her own needs and wants and to learn how to make them happen. Within the narcissistic family system, the locus for meeting emotional needs becomes reversed: where the parents in a healthy family system meet their children's needs, the children in a narcissistic family must meet their parents' needs. As Echo could only reflect the words of others, so children raised in narcissistic families become reactive and reflective people. Because they learn early on that their main job is to meet parental needs, they fail to develop trust in their own instincts and feelings. Instead of acting on their own feelings, they wait to see what the parental system needs and then react to this. In this way, the child becomes a reflection of parental expectations. This is normal to an extent in all families, as the concept of mirroring is a long established tenet of object relations. In the narcissistic family however, the mirror may reflect the child's inability to meet parental needs. This reflection is almost always interpreted as inadequacy and failure on the part of the child (Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman, 1994).

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) explain that for the child of the narcissistic family, intimate relationships can be problematic. As described, children of these families fail to trust others or themselves. In adulthood as much as they may want to form close and loving relationships, they may have difficulty letting down the emotional barriers they have erected.

Types of Narcissistic Families

According to Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) narcissistic families have been broken down into two types: overt and covert. Drug and alcohol abuse, incest and assaultive behaviors are all types of behavior that may be present in overtly narcissistic families, whereas families in which the dysfunction is much subtler pertain to the latter

type. Many children from covertly narcissistic families were fed, clothed, had birthday parties, took family trips and graduated from good schools. The family appeared normal, even on close scrutiny. In the overtly narcissistic families, the parent system can be so self-involved that it may have difficulty meeting even lower-level needs (food, clothing, shelter, and safety). The child born into the overtly narcissistic family may become reactive/reflective very early in life. Perhaps the single most outstanding feature of these families is the family secret. So that the children can meet the parents' needs, the children must often keep the abuse or neglect a secret from outsiders and sometimes from one another. The children in these families are often very isolated from one another. The typical adult who emerges from this family system can be filled with unacknowledged anger, may feel hollow, inadequate and defective; and can suffer from periodic bouts of anxiety and depression (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

This is not to say that all alcoholic families are narcissistically driven. Indeed, it may be possible that although the parent system is alcoholic, it may still be emotionally available for the children part/most of the time. However, given the nature of the parental systems of the alcoholic, drug abusing, and/or sexually abusive family, it would appear that the parents' primary focus lies in getting their own needs met to use, drink and exert power and control. The fact that the parent system drinks, uses or abuses is not what makes it narcissistic, but rather it is its focus on getting its own needs met instead of meeting the children's needs that makes it narcissistic. Drinking, using drugs and abusing younger family members are merely examples of some of the more overt needs that are getting met.

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) claim that the covertly narcissistic family is harder to recognize, as the dysfunctional behaviors of the parent system are more subtle. The adult children can manifest all the same symptoms that are associated with an alcohol troubled family, without any evidence of alcohol or drug abuse. This type of family looks just fine from the outside and even from the inside. Nobody took drugs, drank, was abusive, or suffered from mental illnesses. On closer scrutiny however, it becomes apparent that the needs of the parents were the focus of the family, and that the children were in some way expected to meet these needs. If the children were expected to meet their parents' needs, they were failing to get their own needs met, and failing to learn how to express their needs and feelings appropriately. The children are then learning how to mask their feelings, how to pretend to feel things they do not, and how to keep from experiencing their real feelings. Often these adult children report that things went along fine in the childhood home until one of the children made emotional demands on the parents. Things would often get very tense at that time and the children had to learn how to act happy. In effect, the children were meeting the parents' need for 'smooth sailing', while sacrificing their own needs for emotional support (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994).

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) posit that survivors of narcissistic families have difficulty with trust, but not because their needs went unmet in infancy. On the contrary, many survivors of covertly narcissistic families appear to have been well nurtured in infancy and had both their physical and psychological needs met in a healthy way for the first twelve to twenty-four months of life (and longer for some). In fact the problems only begin in the narcissistic family when the children are old enough to begin

asserting themselves and making emotional demands on their parent system. The parent system may be unable to tend to these needs and it may be resentful or threatened by them.

As the child grows, the parents' own identity may become more and more involved with the child's development. Simultaneously, as the child's needs become both more complicated and better articulated, he or she may start to infringe more obviously on the parent system. A cranky infant who demands parental attention at an inconvenient time can, after all, be placed in a crib with the door shut. An irate and tearful nine-year-old is an entirely different matter. As the child's psychological needs become more of a factor in the life of the family, the narcissistic family truly develops. The parent system is unable to meet the child's needs, and in order to survive the child must be the one to adapt. The inversion process starts: the responsibility for meeting needs gradually shifts from the parent to the child. Whereas in infancy the parents may have met the needs of the child, now it is the child who is attempting to meet the needs of the parent. Unfortunately this is the only way the child can gain attention, acceptance and approval (Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman, 1994).

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) clarify that as a child grows and develops, his/her need to please him/herself and friends increases as the need to please the parents decreases. In a healthy family, this still does not change the basic conceptualization of parental responsibility: to meet the child's needs. In the narcissistic family though, as the child's needs for differentiation and fulfillment of emotional needs escalates with normal development, so does the parents' belief that their child is intentionally thwarting them, becoming increasingly selfish and so on. The parents,

feeling threatened, thus “dig in their heels” and expect the child more and more to meet parental needs. Somewhere between infancy and adolescence, the parents lose the focus and stop seeing the child as a discrete individual with feelings and needs to be validated and met. The child becomes, instead, an extension of the parents. Normal emotional growth is seen as selfish and deficient, and this is what the parents mirror to the child. For the child to gain approval he/she must meet a spoken or unspoken need of the parent and approval is contingent on the child meeting the parental system’s needs.

There are predictable means by which narcissistic family members communicate and/or relate with one another. These are the criteria by which the system operates. The purpose of this system is to insulate the parents from the emotional needs of the children, in essence, to protect the parent system. The rules of this system often discourage open communication of feelings by the children and limit their access to the parents, while giving the parents unlimited access to the children. Another ineffective communication technique used in narcissistic families is triangulation where the parents communicate through a third party, usually a child. The parents may use the child as a buffer so that they do not ever have to communicate directly, thus using the child as a shield against intimacy between one another. In this covertly narcissistic family system, the adults’ preoccupation with getting their own needs met is driving the relationships. The children can’t predict how or when good times will happen or will fail to happen. In fact the children often feel as if they are doing something right when intimacy is encouraged, and feel as if they have made a crucial mistake when it is discouraged. The children often wind up taking on too much responsibility for events that are actually quite random in nature. The children often end up getting certain needs met quite by accident-as a by-

product of the parents getting their needs met. These children then begin to believe that they caused a parent to be more loving, for example, which only encourages them to believe that they have control over the parents' actions. When the parent reverts back to form, they may then believe that they too have caused the rejection. In effect these children cannot win as they are taking responsibility for things they do not control. They begin to believe that there is really something wrong with them; they got it right once but then they blew it. The children will in effect continue to try to hit the moving target (Donaldson- Pressman and Pressman, 1994).

Effects on the Children

In narcissistic families, be they covert or overt, the children are not entitled to have, express, or experience feelings that are unacceptable to the parents. Children learn to fake, stifle, and deny their feelings so as not to create problems for the parents. The children lose their right to feel and as such, this can become a habit that may cause many problems in adulthood. It is virtually impossible in adulthood to get back a right that never existed from childhood (Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman, 1994).

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) state that lack of parental accessibility refers to emotional accessibility-- the ability to have conversations about feelings. Many adult children of narcissistic families report that they never really had conversations with their parents. Their parents would drive them around, and buy things for them, but if the children really wanted to talk about feelings, the parents would often end up giving advice, lecturing them on what they should or shouldn't do or deny the reality of their feelings. The parents were often too busy doing things for the children, therefore if the child felt resentful, he/she took it to mean that he/she was selfish.

In the overtly narcissistic family, there may be no rules at all governing boundary issues such as privacy. This may be a totally foreign concept. Children's possessions, time, space and even physical bodies may be the property of a parent, caregiver or more powerful sibling. In the covertly narcissistic family, there may be clear rules governing all manners of boundary issues, including physical privacy. The problem however, is twofold. First, the rules may be broken by the parents as their needs dictate, and second there are no boundaries in terms of emotional expectations for the children. The children are always expected to meet the parents' needs, but the needs of the children are often only met by sheer coincidence (Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman, 1994).

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) explain that adults raised in these families often fail to realize that they have the right to say no, to limit what they will do for others, and that they do not have to be physically and emotionally accessible to anyone at any and all times. In their families of origin, they did not have the right to say no to parental demands, or to discriminate between fair and unfair requests. These children never learned how to set boundaries because it was not in the parents' best interest to teach them this skill.

In a recent published paper, Cohen (1998) examines the narcissistic tendencies of non-custodial fathers and the effects they play in the post-divorce adjustment of their children. From her work as a supervisor of social workers who provide the courts in Israel with professional evaluations in child custody cases, and as a clinical social worker at a divorce mediation center herself, the author believes that narcissistic parents are seen as treating their children as extensions of themselves. She believes that the parents expect their children to meet their own narcissistic needs; although they are unable to meet their

children's needs for acceptance, and act critical and angry when their children try to express their own feelings, will and independent personality. These parents often obstruct the development of their children's true self. Nonetheless, narcissistic possessiveness of the child does not necessarily exclude emotional giving. According to Cohen (1998) the narcissistic mother in fact often loves her child passionately. Much the same can be said of the fathers. Many such fathers spend a lot of time with their children and invest great amounts of energy in fostering their children's development. However, they will focus not on their children's emotional needs, but rather on promoting their intellectual, physical or artistic development, which will only serve as reflection and proof of their own success as parents. The men in Cohen's (1998) study refused to take on any responsibility for the breakup of their marriage, and the severed relationship with their children. They tended to blame their ex-wives and even their children. The men honestly felt rejected by their children and victimized by the courts and their ex-wives. They felt very injured, in fact, when their children did not meet their demands.

To some extent, the hurt feelings may resemble those of many parents as their growing children go their own way apparently ungrateful and unconcerned with their own wants. Yet here the sense of injury is rooted in the narcissistic father's enormous need for affirmation and, unsoftened by normal empathy and understanding, becomes unappeasable, so much so that it justifies for them the abandonment of their own children. Most of the men in Cohen's study (1998) didn't perceive themselves as abandoning their children, but apparently felt so hurt that they believed that the children had actually abandoned them. All of the men were oblivious to their children's pain, and none could tolerate their children's anger. None had any sense of their children's reality

or much respect for their schedules, interests, and need to live their own lives, while all the men expected the children to accommodate their own very rigidly defined needs. The literature on narcissistic parents points out that such parents demand from their children unconditional adoration and mirroring and sometimes reject them when they do not provide it.

Other Proponents in the Field

Brown

Brown (1998) discusses how the reverse self-object or parentified child experience negatively impacts the development of the cohesive self. A reverse self-object experience occurs when the parent expects the infant or child to meet the parent's underdeveloped narcissistic needs. Instead of empathically meeting the infant's or child's needs, especially mirroring the grandiose self and providing unconditional approval, the parent expects or demands that the infant or child will be empathically responsive to the parent's needs. A pattern is then established where the child's physical needs are met, but the psychological ones go unmet, and the child is expected to meet the emotional needs of the parent. This child is approved of only when he/she is able to meet these undeveloped, narcissistic needs of the parent.

Brown (1998) goes on to give an example where the parent has the undeveloped need to be the center of attention, envied by all and considers others to be an extension of the self. The child, by extension, must fulfill these needs by insuring that the parent stay the center of attention, and the parent approves of the child only to the extent that others admire the parent for having such a wonderful child and to the degree that the child commands attention from others through talent, physical looks, academic excellence, etc.

The children are approved of in so much that they can fulfill the parents needs, and not according to their own worth. The author points out that the child is then burdened because he/she is thrust into an adult role of ensuring the well being of the parent, especially the emotional well being.

Parents who exhibit narcissistic tendencies have intense needs for control. A situation in which this may occur may be in the choosing of clothes. The child must wear clothes and colors selected by a parent and are not given the chance to choose for themselves. Everything must match and the child cannot wear a color that the parent doesn't like. The decision is based on what the parent wants and perceives as attractive. The child, who is merely an extension of the parent, must look a certain way. This control may and often does extend to other areas of the child's life. Another example is when a child is ordered to do what a parent wants, without questions or delays. The child may be punished for making an error or for taking too long to carry out the deed. Often the personal integrity of the child is not respected (Brown, 1998).

Klein

Klein's (1990) position is similar to that of Brown. He posits that the covertly narcissistic parents demonstrate a failure in the development of adequate psychic structure for self-esteem regulation, which leads to an overdependence on external objects for the maintenance of self-esteem. The result is the use of children as narcissistic objects: shortcomings perceived in the child are experienced as reflecting the parents' own failures and are responded to with intense rage. The child is then required to maintain parental self-esteem by functioning as receiver for the parents' unacceptable unheeded evaluations of themselves, which they project onto the child. In an even more

dysfunctional light, and more potentially growth inhibiting to the child is the scenario where one child acts as the recipient of both the positive and negative projected elements.

Malone as described by Klein (1990) explains:

When separation –individuation is incomplete, the individual cannot differentiate him/herself sufficiently from his/her inner models and tends, or is compelled to repeat them. In addition, the models internalized include maladaptive and pathological relationship experiences with parents and significant others which usually are not modified or corrected by experience. This ultimately sets the stage for the kinds of inadequacy differentiated maladaptive personal-interpersonal motivations, behaviors, defense, and relationships that profoundly affect marital choice, marriage, parental functioning and family life. (p.162)

In 1990, Klein explored familial narcissistic object relations. He claims narcissistic parents can split off and project disavowed and/or cherished parts of their personalities onto their children. This serves to either alter the parents' poor self-esteem or to strengthen their high self-esteem, which reflects their narcissistic vulnerability. In these families, a basic function of the child is to maintain parental self-esteem by colluding in reenacting with the parent these unresolved relationships from the parents' families of origin, which significantly affected the development of their self-esteem. In the process, the children's sense of worth and value becomes inescapably tied to the services that they provide for their struggling parents. The offspring of such parents are used as narcissistic objects: shortcomings perceived in the child are experienced as reflecting the parents' own inadequacies and are responded to by narcissistic rage and devaluation. Klein (1990) states that:

The narcissistic object, or self object in Kohutian terms, serves to feed the 'merger-hungry personality' of the parents, who are unable to discriminate their own emotions, cognitions, and perceptions from those of the children. The children in essence live through the parents. (p.135)

Parentifying the child serves to entrap both the child and the parents in a symbiotic matrix in which all parties experience intense anxiety at the thought of physical or emotional separation. The children are forced prematurely to assume functional independence at the expense of failing to develop healthy, age-appropriate dependence on the adult object world. Klein (1990) posited that:

Should this child attempt to proceed with the normal process of autonomy, the price he/she faces is abandonment by the family and withdrawal of all supplies, leaving that child with the fear of isolation and detachment. Should the child choose to maintain the idealized, good object relationship with the parents, it comes at the expense of failure of ego autonomy and self-definition. (p. 155)

Miller

Alice Miller (1981) notes that the parents in a narcissistic family have found in their child's false self the confirmation that they were looking for. They see a substitute for their own missing structures. The child, who was unable to build up his/her own structures, is dependent on the parents. He/she cannot rely on his/her own emotions, has gained no experience with trial and error with them, and no sense of his/her own real needs, and is alienated from his/herself to the highest degree. As an adult, he/she is still dependent on affirmation from a partner and from peers. The child was loved and

accepted for his/her portrayal of the false self. Intellectual abilities may flourish in such an individual, but the emotional life remains unauthentic.

McCarthy

In studying the effects of psychological abuse on children, McCarthy (1990) claims that “abusive parents attack their children’s self-esteem when they feel threatened, while encouraging regression and discouraging age-appropriate functioning” (p. 182). He also believes that:

Youngsters from highly abusive families exhibit not only depression and cognitive deficits, such as poor abstraction ability, but also limitations in self-awareness and problems with the identification and differentiation of feelings. These families have in common systems of functioning that simultaneously rely on devaluation and dependence on the child as an outlet for the parents’ symbiotic needs and damaged self-esteem. The abuse curbs emotional development both by defining intimacy in terms of abusive interactions and by interfering with the processing of affective states that are too anxiety provoking to be integrated. Abusive parents have in common an overidentification with the child and the consistent use of the child to counterbalance their own projections and disappointments. When the pathological parents feel threatened, they try to eradicate the child’s ego boundaries and signs of the child’s self. (p.183)

The parents [may] unconsciously identify the child with their own abusive parents, against whom they are retaliating. Both the abused individual who acts out and the one who directs hate inwardly tend to recoil from intimacy, since intimacy has signified being attacked and humiliated in the family. (p.185)

Given McCarthy's arguments, it would be extremely interesting to further study this group in a more qualitative and rich fashion in an attempt to uncover the struggles and feelings they encounter in their romantic relationships.

McCarthy (1990) goes on to claim that:

Family research studies confirm that abusive parents tend to be undifferentiated partners who compete with each other and with their children for attention and nurturance. More or less healthy parents make demands on children to counteract their own injured narcissism, but they do so largely without devaluation and the sadistic use of projective identification. Under sufficient stress abusive parents attack the child who fails to gratify their needs, thereby giving vent to longstanding frustrations and feelings of being threatened by the child's individuation and competency. (p. 186)

Elkind –Instrumental Narcissism

In 1991, David Elkind introduced the notion of instrumental narcissism in parents. He explains that this is a syndrome manifested by parents who feel compelled to transform their infants and young children into geniuses. He posits that the parents' efforts devalue the child's own abilities and exaggerate the parents' self-perceived magical powers.

In these parents, offspring seem to awaken a long-discarded narcissistic investment in their own powers, namely the magical thinking of early childhood. The birth of a child reawakens and transforms this investment in magical thinking into the parents' conviction that they can make the child anything they wish. (p.300)

This instrumental narcissism could be seen as yet another manifestation of a covertly narcissistic family in which the needs of the children are secondary to the needs of the parent, namely to make the child into a masterpiece. This category does not include the parents who undertake an early education program because of a sincere desire to help the child be the best he or she can be. Such parents often abandon their plans when they realize how unhappy the child has become. The instrumentally narcissistic parents completely ignore the child's reactions and persist with such programs. Parents who engage in instrumental narcissism tend to be highly sensitive to the reactions of others, inhibited, shy, and self-effacing. Such individuals prefer to direct attention away from themselves, to avoid being the center of attention, and to listen carefully for signs of criticism. They tend to get their feelings hurt often and often feel ashamed and humiliated for little reason. Although such parents may be quite shy, they constantly push their children into the spotlight.

Elkind (1991) claims that the narcissistic parents' failure to respect the individuality of their child and mirror and respect back to the child causes long lasting damage to the child's self-esteem. In quoting Alice Miller, Elkind (1991) claims that, "such a child, having subordinated his personal feelings and desires to those of his parents, is unable to feel fully authentic as an adult" (p. 305).

These parents, although able to differentiate between themselves and their children, still tend to see their children as raw material that they can transform into a masterpiece through their own magical interventions. Instrumental narcissistic parents also ignore their children's individuality and sense of autonomy.

Jurkovic- The Parentified Child

In his 1997 book, Gregory Jurkovic examines the plight of the parentified child. Based on years of his own clinical research, the author claims that important etiological factors can be found in the parents' developmental histories and personalities, which leave them with pressing needs for nurturance, support, and recognition from others, including their children. The operative factor in many of these histories appears to be the presence of some type of marked privation, exploitation, or boundary disturbance such as sexual abuse, neglect, pathological parentification, or overprotection. Many of these parents' attachment to their primary caregivers may have been disrupted. Thus role reversals may occur in parent-child relationships because of the unavailability of secure attachment figures in the lives of the parents. Precisely when this begins in the life of the child varies according to theory. Some believe that as early as the seventh month of life, normal children begin to resonate with and respond to the affect, intentions, and projections of their primary care giver. As a result, spontaneity and self-development may be sacrificed, as they increasingly become aware of what their parents need them to be.

Jurkovic (1997) goes on to state that oftentimes, before parentifying their children, parents with emotionally impoverished developmental histories seek parenting from their mates. Parents' premature demands of independence in young children do not teach children independence, but rather nondependence on their parents. Obvious displays of parental neediness, helplessness, and dependency also directly elicit caretaking responses from children. These can range from suicidal gestures in their children's presence to chronic somatic complaints. Many parentified children are enmeshed with one parent and disengaged from the other, or involved in shifting

coalitions (triangulation) in which the parents actively compete for the child's support and loyalty. This can entrap the child in a predicament of split loyalty. They are told by one parent of the failings of the other and are often drawn into the role of refereeing and attempting to reconcile the parents' differences or are coerced to cut off from one of the parents.

Jurkovic (1997) claims that peer relating is threatening to parental figures who rely on their children for support and self-definition. Therefore, they may interfere either directly or indirectly in their children's friendships. To the extent that their children do become involved in relationships outside of the home, parents often fail to monitor them because of their own self-absorption. In these cases, the children are at risk of forming problematic alliances.

According to Jurkovic (1997), children who are deprived of their inherent right to appropriate parenting often later seek compensation from others, including their partners and children (p.47). The greatest loss experienced by destructively parentified children is loss of childhood, although the bitterness, disappointment, depression, and other affects of this deprivation may not be felt until later on in life. Children who have been parentified often experience a loss of trust, both in parental figures and others. The implicit contract between parent and child is broken when parents consistently fail to care. Pervasive mistrust also compromises parentified individuals' ability to trust themselves that is to believe their perceptions and to experience their own inner life. This capacity is nurtured by caretakers who accept and respond appropriately to their offspring's' spontaneous thoughts, emotions, and needs. The feelings of abandonment

and loneliness that many parentified children experience, but are often unable to access or to express for fear of alienating parental figures, are often unconsciously acted out.

Along with feelings of loss, deprivation, and depression, anger and resentment are common in the lives of parentified children. However these feelings usually remain dormant, the implication being that expressing anger or resentment would only further burden and hurt parental figures (Jurkovic, 1997). This inability to express negative affect may carry through the child's life, and may result in unfulfilling and unactualized careers, friendships, and romantic ties. Jurkovic claims that the legacy of destructive parentification may also include overwhelming guilt and shame. The anxiety and depression of pathologically parentified individuals often partially relates to their guilt about the troubles of family members. They find it difficult to be happy and to enjoy their success knowing that family members whom they care for are not doing well emotionally, physically, financially, or in other ways. The ongoing problems of parents and other family members are persistent reminders to parentified children of their inability to fulfill their roles. Thus, they often perceive themselves to be disappointments to their families. Being a disappointment implies shame and associated feelings of worthlessness.

Jurkovic (1997) posits that parentification confers a sense of identity and self-esteem to children, especially girls. This identity, however, revolves around the needs of family members. For many, their caretaking activities define who they are, and therefore, later in life, rescuing others meets an even more profound need, which serves to confirm their very existence.

The fact that parentification is often rooted in infancy implies that core personality processes (e.g., attachment, narcissism, separation-individuation) are affected. Many parentified children are therefore at risk for developing unhealthy traits and personality disorders. For example, they may not fully develop object constancy, self-soothing skills, and the capacity to be alone. Co-dependency is also a probable outcome of the parentification process. The co-dependent, self-defeating qualities of parentified individuals can greatly interfere with their giving and receiving of care. Having originally been trained to meet parental needs, this adult does not later in life associate giving with spontaneous pleasure. Rather, giving represents a duty that is compulsively discharged to avoid loss of love. Giving under these conditions then is not related to intimacy per se, but to security. As a result, it is often invasive and controlling. Asking for and receiving help are also problematic for the parentified adult. Although in need of attention, nurturance, and support, they have learned in their families of origin to deny their needs-to remain strong for others. Accepting help is a sign of weakness as in incongruent with their definition of themselves as helpers. They may also mistrust receiving anything from others, remembering from childhood the high price that was always associated with it. At a deeper level, the parentified adult may often feel unworthy of care (Jurkovic, 1997).

Having now explored the narcissistic personality and the various sorts of covertly narcissistic family systems, and the potentially damaging effects they may have on the children, I will now review the research in the field. This section will cover mainly empirical studies of individuals who have been raised in both overtly and covertly narcissistic families. Of particular interest to this study are the effects that these

upbringings had on the adult survivors and how these effects manifest in romantic relationships.

Research Studies on the Narcissistic Family

Hadley, Holloway, and Mallinckrodt, (1993) studied ninety-seven adult offspring from diversified dysfunctional families (some alcoholic and some not) in order to discover if they suffered from adult adjustment difficulties as a result of their upbringing and if the type of difficulties encountered varied with the type of dysfunction. Using the Self-Report Family Inventory (Beavers, Hampson, & Hulgus, 1990), the Bell Object Relations-Reality Testing Inventory (Bell, Billington, & Becker, 1985), the Self-Expression Inventory (Robbins & Patton, 1985), Internalized Shame Scale (Cook, 1990), and the Problem History Scale (Cook, 1989), the authors report that adult children of alcoholics (ACA) and adult children of dysfunctional families (ACDF) were not significantly different in family dysfunction, object relations deficits, self-expression, and problems with compulsive behaviors. These findings suggest that the degree of family dysfunction is more predictive of adult adjustment problems than of whether the dysfunction involved alcohol abuse. It was also found that adults who reported their families as having high conflict, poor overall competence and low levels of cohesion, also reported the highest levels of adjustment difficulties. The results also suggest that family dysfunction leads to significant adult self-representation and interpersonal impairment, especially difficulties with trust and intimacy. Subjects who reported high levels of family dysfunction scored high on internalized shame and low on self-esteem measures. This study shows that emotional needs must be met in childhood or else developmental problems may occur.

However, the subjects who came from dysfunctional, non-alcoholic families did emerge from families where the dysfunction nonetheless was very overt, as in physical, sexual abuse, mental illness, or drug abuse. This study failed to include adults from covertly narcissistic families and it is unclear whether the results would have been similar had this population been studied. Given the types of difficulties that this sample experiences (difficulty with trust and intimacy), it would be interesting to explore the romantic relationship issues that this population encounters.

In another study examining the etiology of interpersonal distress in late adolescence (Motherhead, Kivlighan, & Wynkoop, 1998), one hundred and fifty two undergraduate students were studied to determine whether alcoholism, parental dysfunction or the resulting disruption of parental attachment was potentially the cause of the distress. The authors used the Short Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (Selzer & Vinokur, 1975), Risk in Intimacy Inventory (Pilkington & Richardson, 1988), Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (Horowitz, Rosenberg, Baer, Ureno & Villasenor, 1988), Interpersonal Control Scale (Paulhaus, 1983), Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Grennberg, 1987), Parental Attachment Questionnaire (Kenny, 1987), and Family Structure Survey (Lopez, Campbell, & Watkins, 1988) to determine the results. The authors claim that subjects who reported poor parental attachment had greater levels of interpersonal distress (intimacy problems). It was also discovered that it was not parental alcohol abuse or family dysfunction per se that predicted interpersonal problems, but rather the poor parental attachment that resulted. Mothershead et al., (1998) claim these findings suggest that there are other factors at work in the family of origin that may lead to later distress for the children. The authors claim that it is therefore important to

study parental attachment style. This is an interesting piece for this thesis to incorporate especially since the families of the participants in this study exhibited such covert dysfunction. Indeed, something else may be at play here. It appears that overt dysfunction was not the only thing going on. Adults from covertly dysfunctional families may too be suffering with high levels of interpersonal distress, although the literature has failed to study this population in any depth. It would also be interesting to study adults instead of college students as one's fear of intimacy may manifest as one ages. For college-aged students, it is questionable whether fear of intimacy is truly a factor, and not merely an age appropriate desire to remain unattached in order to experience as many relationships as possible.

Guinta and Compas (1994) studied young women whose family of origins suffered from alcoholism, psychiatric distress, and a combination of the two (comorbid disorder). Another group of women who emerged from normal families was also used to determine how these women experienced intimacy. One hundred and eighty-four, mainly single women were put into four groups: those whose parents suffered from alcohol abuse only, psychiatric distress only, comorbid and neither. The women were given the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (McAuley et al, 1978), Psychiatric History and Symptom Checklist (Benson & Heller, 1987), Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991), the Symptom Checklist-90 Revised (Derogatis, 1983), the Schwarz-Zuroff Love Inconsistency Scale (Schwarz & Zuroff, 1979) and the Interparental Conflict Scale (Schwarz & Zuroff, 1979). It was found that daughters of alcohol-abusing parents were no more distressed than were other women, showing that adult children of alcoholic parents are not a unique population. The results showed no greater fear of intimacy in

daughters of distressed parents, as compared to daughters of normal parents. There was no relationship found between fear of intimacy and parental alcohol abuse or psychiatric history of parents.

One however wonders about the adult children of covertly distressed families. There is no relationship between overt dysfunction and fear of intimacy in offspring, but what about covert dysfunction? One also wonders if struggles with intimacy may exist, that may fail to manifest as a fear. A quantitative tool such as a fear of intimacy scale might miss key components of a subject's experience. Another concern for me resides in the fact that simply because the parents of the normal group did not suffer from overt dysfunction, does not imply that they were without covert dysfunction. This, however, was not tested for.

In a recent study examining adult self-esteem and locus of control as a function of familial alcoholism and dysfunction (Werner & Broida, 1991), it was questioned whether adult children of alcoholic families differed from adult children of dysfunctional families without alcoholism. One hundred and ninety-five adults from the engineering department of a large corporation were sampled and were tested using the Moos Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1981), Jackson Personality Inventory (Jackson, 1984), Rotter Internal/External Locus of Control Test (Rotter, 1966), and an unpublished scale used for testing presence or absence of parental alcoholism. The authors report that being raised in an alcoholic family did not predict lower self-esteem or a more external locus of control in adult subjects. Instead, it was dysfunction in the family of origin that was reflected in differences in self-esteem. The authors suggest that this study broadens previous work by examining dysfunction in the family as a separate variable.

This study shows that perhaps the literature should begin to look not only at populations with overt dysfunction in their family of origin, but perhaps at covertly dysfunctional families as well. Again, it is difficult to ascertain whether the dysfunction present in this study is truly as covert as the one defined by Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994), but it does open our eyes to the fact that other types of dysfunction exist and are worthy of study. Years ago, adult children of alcoholic families were the ones thought to have emerged the most damaged. Now we see that other forms of quasi-covert dysfunction may affect adult children as well (psychiatric illnesses). Perhaps even more covert types of dysfunction exist that the field again needs to include in empirical research and testing. It would be interesting to study if and how low self-esteem that results from a dysfunctional family of origin affects the experience of the romantic relationship.

In a similar study conducted to explore whether adult children of dysfunctional families with alcoholism differ from adult children of dysfunctional families without alcoholism specifically in intimate relationships, Harrington and Metzler (1997) tested one hundred and twenty-six participants using the Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (Jones, 1991), Self-Report Family Inventory (Beavers et al, 1990), Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Snyder, 1981) and the Dyadic Trust Scale (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). The authors found that adult children raised in families with higher levels of dysfunction reported higher levels of global distress in their current relationships, whereas adult children raised in families with lower levels of dysfunction reported lower levels of global distress. Therefore the degree of dysfunction, rather than the presence of dysfunction, appears to be related to global distress in intimate relationships. The results

suggest that the dysfunction in the family of origin, rather than the presence of parental alcoholism, is significantly related to difficulty in intimate relationships.

Again, in this study we see the importance of looking beyond what we know (overt dysfunction in family of origin) to what we don't know (covert dysfunction in family of origin) to potentially explain difficulties in adult functioning. This quantitative research study only serves to wet the qualitative palate.

One important gap exists in this study. The authors chose to use subjects who were currently in very serious romantic relationships. The data may have been different had the authors used subjects who were not in committed relationships at the time. With regards to testing for difficulty in intimate relationships, perhaps those who have never been able to form a committed relationship or have dissolved a committed relationship should have been included.

Fisher, Jenkins, Harrison, and Jesch (1993) compared personality characteristics of one hundred and seventy-four subjects grouped into adult children of alcoholics (ACOA), adult children of dysfunctional families (ADFH), or adult children of non-dysfunctional families (AIDFH). Using the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1987), the authors report that the ACOA group were more similar than different to other adults who reported significant problems in their family of origin (ADFH). Also the ACOA group was found to be more rebellious, unsure of themselves, nonconforming, worried about the future and immature than the AIDFH group. The ACOA group was different from the AIDFH group on nine of the twenty-eight CPI scales, but there were no significant differences between the ACOA and ADFH groups.

However, the authors failed to account for the fact that some subjects in the AIDFH group had family dysfunction that was not assessed in this study. If so, the AIDFH group would overlap with the ADFH group and make between group comparisons suspect. But this was not accounted for. The major issue here is that the authors assume that all dysfunction is as overt as the dysfunction that exists in their ACDF group (divorce, parental death, physical abuse and sexual abuse). However, covert abuse, although subtle, does exist in many families (Donaldson-Pressman & Pressman, 1994), and may have emulated many of the characteristics of the subjects of the dysfunctional group, had it been tested for. The authors are obviously limited in their understanding of the varieties of covert abuse that exist. Clearly, more research in this area must be conducted to alert the field of its presence. Perhaps the reason why the ACOA group differs from the AIDFH group on only nine out of twenty-eight CPI scales, is because some covert form of abuse exists in the latter, but was not tested for.

Briere and Runtz (1990) conducted a study to determine whether child abuse, *per se*, is associated with later dysfunction or whether certain types of abuse are related to specific later psychological difficulties. Using a Family Experiences Questionnaire (Briere & Runtz, 1988) to test two hundred and seventy-seven female undergraduate students, the authors claim that there may be specific impacts of each form of child maltreatment, above and beyond any effects they have in common with one another. Psychological attacks and criticism by one's parents appeared to be specifically associated with subsequent low self-evaluation. The authors have shown that abuse need not be overt to be damaging. This study points to the importance of examining the

various types of abuse that exist, both overt and covert, to discover their distinct effects on offspring.

In 1996, Smith studied the effects of emotional and physical abuse on self-esteem, trust and intimacy. Smith used a total of two hundred and sixty-three female subjects and tested them using the Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1987), the Briere Self-Esteem Scale (Briere, 1987), the Specific Interpersonal Trust Scale (Johnson & Swap, 1982), the Rempel Trust Scale (Rempel, 1985), the Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991) and the Miller Social Intimacy Scale (Miller, 1982). The research found that emotionally abusive behavior from the family of origin was related to self-esteem, but no such relationship was found with physically abusive behavior. Smith (1996) claims that:

Many experts in the area of child mistreatment define psychological abuse specifically as an attack on the self. It is the internalization of this attack that is the most potent source of damage in emotional abuse. Physical abuse may not be quite as damaging in this regard because the child could possibly make sense of the abuse as being justified in response to something he or she did wrong, particularly in the case of severe physical punishment. Emotionally abusive behavior was also found to impact trust. (p. 92)

Smith (1996) claims that psychologically abusive behavior has more of an effect on self-esteem, trust and intimacy than physically abusive behavior. She found that psychologically abusive behaviors were found to be indirectly related to intimacy through mediating variables of self-esteem and trust of romantic partners. She also discovered that emotionally abusive behavior by either the mother or the father was related to self-

esteem, trust, fear of intimacy and degree of intimacy. It is clear from this and several aforementioned studies that covert abuse exists. It affects personality characteristics (McCarthy, 1990, Werner & Broida, 1991) and the ability to succeed in intimate relationships (Harrington & Metzler, 1997; Smith, 1996).

In a more recent study, Jacobvitz and Bush (1996) examined how women's reconstructions of various family patterns during childhood and adulthood related to their levels of depression, anxiety and self-esteem. The authors wondered whether childhood physical abuse itself or whether more covert patterns of enmeshment and triangulation would be more likely to be related to self-esteem, anxiety and depression in adulthood. Triangulation has been found to involve marital discord and expectations that the child take on parental roles, making decisions providing the parent with emotional support. Ninety-three women completed the Family Relationship Questionnaire, the Parents' Relationship Scale, and the Lifetime Experiences Survey. The researchers for this study developed all the questionnaires. It was found that:

Women who describe experiences of father-daughter enmeshment and overinvolvement often have been found to be depressed and experience low self-esteem, guilt feelings, anxiety-related symptoms, and interpersonal difficulties characterized by feelings of isolation and mistrust of others. (p.733)

During the transition to adulthood, people face the challenge of leaving home and developing support networks. Parents who continue to rely on their children for emotional support or guidance may interfere with their children's independence, possibly resulting in lowered self-esteem and heightened personal distress.

Regression analysis revealed that father-daughter alliances during childhood predicted depression and low-self esteem even after controlling for the effects of physical abuse. Jacobvitz and Bush (1996) claim that:

The critical feature of cross-generational alliances is that parents turn to their opposite-sex children for the emotional sustenance and intimacy that is usually derived from the spousal relationship. They share secrets with the children and expect their children to listen to their problems, empathize with their feelings, and provide them with affection. At the same time, these parents do not provide their children with the needed parental guidance and support. (p. 732)

The results of this study confirm that abuse need not be overt to be damaging. This study is in fact exceptional as it controlled for, and separated, overt and covert abuse variables to better understand their unique effects on offspring. The women in this study who experienced covert forms of abuse (non-physical) suffered from low self-esteem and were at risk for depression and anxiety as well. It would be interesting to study if and how the effects of such an upbringing would later manifest in romantic relationships. The authors (1996) in fact state that unhealthy alliances with fathers may play a significant role in other aspects of daughters' development, such as hampering the daughters' capacity to form intimate, romantic relationships (p.740).

Significance of this Research Topic

Much of the literature reviewed in the previous section points to the fact that family dysfunction, whether overt or covert can have damaging effects on adult character formation. It has been shown that dysfunction in the family of origin often has permanent, damaging effects on the child's self-esteem (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Jacobvitz

& Bush, 1996; McCarthy, 1990; Smith, 1996; Werner & Broida, 1991), and can lead to interpersonal distress and problems with intimacy (Hadley et al., 1993; Harrington & Metzler, 1993; Mothershead et al., 1998; Smith, 1996), and can alter the child's developing character in a permanent and damaging fashion (McCarthy, 1990).

Given what we now know, the contribution of this study was to discover how adult children of covertly narcissistic families fare in romantic relationships. What struggles did they face on a daily basis with their partners? How was it for them to be in a relationship? What were their experiences of romantic relationships? I was unable to find any qualitative research articles dealing with these types of questions. A lack of depth and richness exists in the research that is available. The published research helps us to better understand that a problem exists, but it sheds no light on what the deeper, subjective, experience of this problem really is for the individuals who are affected. The rationale then for this study is apparent. A problem clearly exists for many adult survivors of covertly narcissistic families, and this study has attempted to assist therapists and educators alike to better understand the struggles and feelings that this obscure group may experience in romantic relationships in a more deep and rich fashion. Therapy is a journey taken by therapist and client, a journey that delves deep into the world as perceived and experienced by the client (Corey, 1996). With the addition of this study to the literature, perhaps therapists will better understand, for some, what that world feels like.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding and insight into the romantic experiences of adult children of covertly narcissistic families. This study aimed to

comprehend the struggles, feelings, and experiences of adult children of covertly narcissistic families in a deep and rich fashion, so that the field can better learn how to gain access into this obscure and understudied experience. I am interested in gaining insight into what we, as counselors can learn from the adults whom I will have studied. I was also hoping to better understand their coping strategies and insights. This group is an important one to study, as so little is known about it. Adult survivors of this group show many of the same symptoms as ACOA, yet no alcohol is present in the family system. What was once thought of as a narrow group has indeed broadened.

As stated earlier, the fact that parentification is often rooted in infancy implies that core personality processes (e.g., attachment, narcissism, separation-individuation) are affected. Many parentified children are therefore at risk for developing unhealthy traits and personality disorders (Jurkovic, 1997). Another purpose of this study was to discover how the participants experience this influence in their romantic lives. It also attempted to understand the meaning the participants made of their experiences.

Another purpose of this study was to educate counselors and therapists and to inform research. Because this group is so understudied, I was hopeful that many more of these individuals would be helped once the field better understood and recognized this group as a population with special needs and issues. I hoped that the field would also begin to recognize that abuse need not be overt to be damaging and that covert abuse can be as harmful as overt abuse. Lastly, I hoped that once we as a field were better informed, that we could then help our clients to better understand their own childhood struggles and the possible long-term ramifications into their own romantic relationships.

Research Question

The research question for this study was, **What is the experience of romantic relationships for adult children of covertly narcissistic families?**

Rationale for the Study

Much empirical research exists on the struggles of adult survivors of overtly narcissistic families in romantic relationships, yet no studies have been published examining adults of covertly narcissistic families with regards to their experiences of romantic relationships given their childhood backgrounds. Specifically, no qualitative research on either group was found. In particular, many research studies that were examined earlier in this thesis focused primarily on the experiences of adults who were raised in overtly narcissistic families. Guinta and Compas (1994) for example, studied young women who grew up in overtly narcissistic families to determine the effects it had on their experiences of intimacy however, no mention was made of studying the effects of more covert abuse on the experience of intimacy. For these women, no relationship was found between fear of intimacy and family history of overt abuse, but one wonders about more subtle forms of abuse and the effects it may have on one's experience of intimacy.

In another study that was mentioned earlier, Harrington and Metzler (1997) examined whether or not there were differences in the experience of intimacy for adult children of dysfunctional families with alcoholism and those without. It was shown that dysfunction in the family (covert abuse) rather than the presence of alcoholism (overt abuse) was related significantly to difficulty in intimate relationships. Given this finding I believe that it is important then to focus more attention to the covertly narcissistic family

and to understand and explore in a more qualitative fashion what those difficulties may be about. I also believe it would be important to look beyond difficulties to coping strategies, in an attempt to extract not only the struggles of these individuals but perhaps also the tools they may have acquired.

In 1990, McCarthy studied the effects of psychological abuse on children. He found that these youngsters exhibited depression, limits in self-awareness and difficulty with differentiating their feelings. He found that the self-esteem of these children had been damaged and that, for this group, intimacy was something that might be avoided. Given these arguments, I believe it would be extremely beneficial for the field to study this group in a way that allows for more description and richness of experience so that we, as counselors and educators might have greater access to the subjective world of these clients, which is the starting point for better therapy and self-understanding.

Mothersead et al., (1998) found that it was not parental alcohol abuse or family dysfunction per se that predicted interpersonal problems for the offspring, but rather the poor parental attachment that resulted. I believe that our field has put too much focus on the types of abuse that occur rather than the underlying parent-child relationships. Perhaps our field will begin to notice that it is not the presence or absence of overt abuse (alcoholism, etc.), but rather the emotional availability or lack thereof of the parent system that may in part, explain some of the children's difficulties in adulthood. I believe that there is a pre-existing stereotype that if something bad happened in childhood, adult problems are imminent. I believe it is possible for children from overtly narcissistic families to grow up without serious problems, if the parent system was still available to meet the needs of those children. Similarly, I also believe that many children may grow

up in seemingly normal families without any overt abuse, and yet still may experience problems with relationships later on in life. The explanation for this may lie in the fact that despite the normal upbringing, these parents failed to meet their children's emotional needs (covertly narcissistic family). I am not so much interested in the event in childhood that may have caused problems in adulthood, but rather I am more interested in the set of interactions, relationships, and dynamics that existed between parent and child.

Perhaps it is more difficult for the adult covert group to explain and understand the problems they may be experiencing in romantic relationships, as they have no tangible explanations for their difficulties. For this group, perhaps everything seemed normal in their family of origin. Perhaps this group is therefore harder on themselves and more blaming of themselves for their problems. This position may lend itself to experiencing more anxiety, in addition to the relationship problems they may already be enduring. It is my goal to study this anxiety and to help individuals to understand that abuse need not be overt to be present and malignant. Therefore the purpose of this study was to focus on the lived experience of romantic relationships for adult children of covertly narcissistic families, and to analyze their transcripts for emergent and common themes.

CHAPTER 3

Method

This chapter will examine the method that was used to conduct the research, the roles of the participants and the researcher and the participant selection criterion. I will also discuss the data collection procedure, and data analysis procedures. Finally, I will examine the appropriateness of the research design to the research, the rigor, and researcher subjectivity within this study.

Qualitative Analysis

Content analysis as described by Berg (1998) is a general qualitative approach. It does not have its own school in fact it is quite a generic approach to researching lived experience. Qualitative research is characterized by findings that can be expressed and described verbally (Crowl, 1993). Patton (cited in Mertens, 1998), describes the three main reasons for choosing the qualitative method to which I have subscribed. First, because the basis of this research was based on humanistic values, the personal contact and data that emerged from a qualitative study was preferred. Secondly, no appropriate quantitative measure was available to study this area and thirdly, a qualitative method added a depth that was lacking in this particular domain.

Role of the Researcher

As the primary researcher, I acted as more of a traveler (Kvale, 1996), and walked along side my participants as they told their stories. I used empathy, reflective listening and probing where necessary to ensure that I properly understood the experiences of the participants in my study. I believe that I established a warm and trusting atmosphere with my participants, and was therefore able to co-create stories with them. I really wanted to

get at the heart of the stories, and it seemed as if their stories grew and changed as we dialogued about the experiences together. I disclosed my own narcissistic upbringing with the goal of establishing a more even playing field between myself and the participants, and to discourage possible participant editing as a result of either shame or embarrassment.

Role of the Participants

My participants served as co-researchers. They helped me to better understand the experiences they had in their romantic relationships. They obviously knew more about their own personal experiences than I did, and they served to co-research the topic along with me, uncovering new ideas and information about themselves as we went along. My hope was that this study would provide not only new information to myself, but to my participants as well. This hope was in fact realized. Their role in the analysis and in the final product was one of judge. After I coded, categorized, and uncovered themes, the participants were given the task of reading the themes and categories to ensure that the results resonated for them and that they felt represented.

The participants' voices and my own voice were represented, as we were all authorities on the subject at hand having grown up in the covertly narcissistic family. We, together as a group were the experts on the subject. The strength of the study lay in our merging life experiences; separately we were not as mighty as together.

Participant Selection Procedure

Participants were selected on the basis that they were adults (over the age of 21) and that they had grown up in a covertly narcissistic family. I chose to interview adults, as I wanted to ensure that the relationship patterns they had been experiencing were not

as a result of an age appropriate developmental level. They had to believe that the parent system in their family of origin was more focused on getting its own needs met than in meeting the needs of the children. They also had to believe that while growing up, they put the needs of their parents before their own. I put up my poster (Appendix A) at the Satir Model Level One Training Seminar. The information on the poster described the covertly narcissistic family as defined by Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994). Because there is such a shortage of literature in this area, I depended mainly on this book for the descriptions of the narcissistic family. I used lay terminology as a way of ensuring that the poster was easy to understand. Word of mouth was also used and this technique introduced me to the majority of my participants. In these cases, I stated the information verbatim off the poster to the interested potentials, so as to keep the method as similar as possible for all the participants. In certain cases, I gave the poster directly to the interested party.

Preliminary Telephone Interview

I conducted telephone interviews with the interested parties to ensure that no overt abuse existed in their families of origin. Since some of the telephone interviews served as the first contact with interested parties, I read the poster aloud to the interested party. In order to qualify for the research, each participant had to respond affirmatively to all bullets on the poster (Appendix A). These criteria were taken from Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) to be indicative of the narcissistic family. This is how I ascertained that the participants were indeed representative of the population that I was interested in studying. The first telephone contact also served to establish some preliminary rapport with the prospective participants.

Once I spoke with all interested parties, I then picked the first five to be participants, based upon suitability, ability to articulate, and responses to the statements on the poster. I then set up interviews with each one, randomly choosing who was to be interviewed in which order.

I first began by including myself as a participant. This proved to be quite an interesting experience. I had a few questions laid out initially, and I asked a colleague to assist me with the interview. I chose a pseudonym for myself and she audiotaped the conversation between us, first setting it up using my orienting statement. It was important for me to hear how I answered my questions to know if I would be getting the type of information that I sought; information that answered my research question. As I answered my questions and began to free associate in my own mind, I began telling stories of my past, and from these stories, new questions emerged. For instance, I began to notice that there was a pattern to the type of partner that I was attracted to, and to the type of partner that I was repelled by. Based on this realization, I then formulated two new questions and added these questions to my list. This helped me to develop richer and deeper themes upon analysis. It felt healing to talk about my own story and to explore it in my heart and in my head. I hoped that my participants would benefit from the same nurturing experience.

Research Interview

The interviews were scheduled and prior to commencing, I explained the limits of confidentiality, and the procedures regarding anonymity. I then obtained informed consent (see Appendix B) and answered any questions that they had. With the intention of protecting confidentiality, I then asked the participants to choose pseudonyms for

themselves and advised the participant that I was the sole individual to know their true identities. The identification of the participants was kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office.

Data Collection Procedures

Audiotaped interviews took place either in my home or in the participants' office, and lasted between 1-1.5 hours. An orienting statement (Appendix C) was given first and then the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way. Open ended questions were asked exploring such issues as: challenges they have faced in romantic relationships, feelings they have experienced, patterns they have noticed, coping strategies they have employed, thoughts they have had, and decisions they have made (see Appendix D). They were able to tell any other stories that they deemed appropriate as well. The main research question however was **"Given your family of origin experiences, what has been your experience of romantic relationships?"**

During each interview, I listened empathetically to the participant's stories. I listened with my research question in mind and with my own personal experiences in mind as well.

I journalled during the interviews and recorded any thoughts that I had with regards to content and affect. I noted when the participant's experiences resonated for me, when I felt the most connected to the participants, and when I felt that I tacitly knew what they were describing. I also noted any thoughts that I had that changed the course of the interview and generally attempted to keep track of or locate myself during the interview process. I also noted participants' body language, emotions, pauses and silences in my journal and later added these descriptions to the transcripts. Throughout the

interviews, I tried to remain open to all the information that was brought up by participants. This was tempered with an understanding, however, that “the researcher is the instrument for data collection” (Mertens, 1998). I only added in my own personal/professional experiences at the end of the interview, after the facts, so as not to sway the participants off any track that they found themselves on. I also added in information from previous interviews, ensuring confidentiality of course, with the goal of being more than just a passive observer. After each interview, I added newer and richer questions, with the goal of hearing everything that I possibly could about their experiences.

During the interviews, I employed empathy, paraphrasing and clarification to ensure in-depth descriptions of events and feelings, and also to ensure the participants knew that their input was valued. At the end of each interview, the participant was thanked and asked if he/she was feeling comfortable with what had transpired and with what feelings had been opened up for them. All of the participants reported that they were feeling fine. The tape was then sent out for professional transcription.

Transcription Process

I gave the tapes of the interviews out for professional transcription. I gave the transcriber no specific instructions regarding what to focus on since I knew that I would be adding those points in myself. When I got the transcripts back from her, I listened to the tapes again and added to the transcripts such elements as emotion, pause, silence, tone of voice, and body language. This was important information to add to the transcripts since these key elements made the difference between what I focused on and what I

didn't focus on while creating the themes (see Appendix E). Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) posit that:

Transcription is theory laden; the choices that researchers make about transcription enact the theories they hold and constrain the interpretations they can draw from their data. Because it has implications for the interpretation of research data and for decision making in practice fields, transcription as a process warrants further investigation. (p. 64)

The authors further claim that many researchers make the mistake of assuming that transcriptions are transparent, directly reflecting in text the 'hard reality' of the actual interaction as captured on audiotape. They believe that this is a strange assumption since we have already discovered that language itself is not transparent and hence constitutes a rich source of examinable data. The authors emphasize that "it is not just the transcription product—those verbatim words written down—that is important; it is also the process that is valuable" (p. 82). Given the importance of transcription, an explanation is in order as to why I failed to transcribe the interviews myself. I intended to transcribe the interviews myself, however, time was a constraint, and it was faster and easier to have them professionally done. However, to ensure that I believed that the transcriptions weren't merely transparent, I did re-listen to each tape with both the typed interview transcript and my journal notes in hand, and made notes of all pauses, expressions of emotion, and non-verbal cues on the part of the participants. This certainly directed my quest for salient data.

Data Analysis Procedure

I followed the content analysis method as described by Berg (1998). In content analysis, researchers examine artifacts of social communication. Typically these include transcriptions of verbal communications. Broadly defined, however, content analysis is any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages. Content analysis provides a method for obtaining good access to the words of a text or transcribed account offered by subjects. It is a “passport” to listening to the words of the text, and understanding better the viewpoint of the speaker (Berg, 1998). Any of the many sampling procedures used in other data collection techniques can be used in content analysis. Within the content analysis model that is described by Berg (1998), the first units of analysis are codes. These are the words or phrases that answer specific questions (Appendix D). Categories comprise the second level of analysis. These constitute the groupings of codes that go together in a meaningful way. Once the codes are found and placed into categorical groups, the researcher then comes up with broad themes that are labeled by a single statement to name the theme. Content analysis can be very helpful in many types of exploratory or descriptive studies (Berg, 1998).

There is very little written about Berg’s (1998) model, therefore I used much of my own logic when I analyzed the data. I thoroughly explained my procedure to my supervisor, Dr. Marla Arvay who was in agreement with it. To begin, I coded each page of each transcript slowly and carefully. With my research question taped to the wall in full view, I highlighted each code that answered the question and pulled it to the side (see Appendix E). After I had completed this procedure for the entire transcript, I then went

through each transcript again to ensure that I hadn't missed anything. I then proceeded to record each code or word onto bristle boards that had headings for each open-ended question asked during the interviews. For example, one of the boards had a heading that read, 'How I felt in relationships', another had a heading that read, 'What I did in relationships' and so forth. I had a board for essentially each open-ended question that I asked. This is how I initially categorized the codes. Each participant's words or codes were recorded with a number next to it to denote interview number and page number for easy access (i.e.; 2:14 denoted interview number 2, page 14). I highlighted each of these numbers with a different color to signify each participant. I did this for every interview. At the end of the sixth interview, I was able to see how many participants and which one in particular had spoken each code.

After the sixth interview, I realized that no new information was coming up, and decided to stop accumulating information. Morse (1995) speaks to the significance of saturation. She claims that a decree of qualitative research is to collect data until saturation occurs. Saturation is defined as data adequacy and operationalized as collecting data until no new information is obtained. In qualitative research, the signals of saturation are determined by the researcher and by evaluating the breadth of the data. Because the data began to form themes in my mind, I assumed that I was at the saturation point. Morse (1995) claims that in the process of saturation, data that initially appeared disconnected begins to form themes and begins to make sense. This is exactly what occurred for me. The feeling that I had when the patterns began to emerge was similar to the experience that Woolsey (1986) describes as an "aha response," that is, what occurs

when the data and the categories seem to suddenly fit together. This can be described as the feeling that came over me when the themes seemed to leap off the pages at me.

At this point, I took fresh bristle boards and wrote the name of each new theme on a board. I then went through each old board and pulled the codes off that seemed to fall into that particular theme. I did this for every theme. After this process was complete, I looked at each bristle board (theme) individually and attempted to cluster the codes together into categories. At the end of this procedure, I had five themes with three main categories within each theme. Finally, for each theme and category, I chose quotes that I felt were the most fitting and illustrative.

Appropriateness of the Design to the Research Topic

This technique lent itself well to this study as it is both descriptive and exploratory and is a good method to use when analyzing research that is new to the field (Berg, 1998). It was my intention to identify a population and to capture commonalities within the population, and the method of creating themes and categories was a particularly useful approach to accomplish this task. I was also hoping to create better delineation and descriptors of the experiences, so that adult children of covertly narcissistic families may be more easily identified in counselling situations with the goal of offering more beneficial and suitable treatment to them.

Rigor: Member Checks/Peer Review

Mertens (1998) states that the member check is the most important criteria in establishing credibility. Rigor was first addressed by member checks. Each participant received a copy of the results and was asked to think about whether they felt seen and heard in the final results. They were also asked to report if they felt that their own

experiences had been captured and depicted through the results. All of the participants felt that their experiences had been captured exceptionally well. I wanted to discover whether or not the themes resonated for them to ensure that the analysis was not purely my own interpretations. I then asked permission of the participants to use exact quotes in the final report. I must admit that I found it very satisfying to discuss the results at length with others who had a full grasp of the information. The next step I took in addressing rigor was to show the bristle boards to two outside judges (both from the counselling psychology department), and to ask each one if they would have put the same codes under the same categories under the same themes as I had. I laid out the bristle boards for each outside judge and asked them if they believed my coding and categorizing logic made sense. Each judge agreed that it had. Both judges had completed theses for the counselling psychology department and I believed that both were impartial and fair judges who would be willing to disagree with my logic if need be. The rigor of the analysis was the issue and we all knew this to be so. Although neither outside judge had used the content analysis method in their own research, each judge was somewhat familiar with it, having read a piece of information about it prior to undertaking the task.

Researcher Subjectivity

Throughout the preparation process for this thesis, I found myself struggling with a number of my own issues. The interest for this thesis topic stemmed from my own family of origin experiences and the subsequent difficulties that I have experienced in my own romantic relationships. Because I grew up in the covertly narcissistic family, there were a number of assumptions that I bumped up against. First, I assumed that the effects of this upbringing would be problematic for maintaining a romantic relationship. I have

suffered most of my life from what I term 'fear of intimacy,' and I naturally assumed that anyone with this upbringing would experience the same type of challenges as I had. It was due in part to these assumptions that my literature review took on a somewhat "cheerleader" tone for the cause. The most obvious problem with this tone was that I would have missed out on the most important benefit of research-- which is to learn something new about people. As long as I had the assumptions that I had, I realized that it was in effect pointless for me to be conducting exploratory research if I already knew what I was going to find! By setting up my interviews in this fashion, I would have also possibly bypassed the positive experiences that my participants may have recounted.

By using my committee and my journaling to inform me as to where I located myself, I think I moved beyond this place of 'knowing' to a more beneficial place of 'not knowing.' This was the biggest struggle that I faced throughout this thesis process, but with awareness and dedication to the goal of exploration, I feel that I moved past it, and hopefully created something that was based in curiosity and openness.

CHAPTER 4

Results

In the first part of this chapter I will discuss the participants, themselves. I will describe who they are and will give a brief synopsis of the type of family that each came from. Many of the words used to describe the families were taken verbatim from the participants. The second part of this chapter will focus on the results of the research. I will reveal the themes, categories and codes that emerged for me as I attempted to make sense of the transcripts.

Participants

Morgan

Morgan is a woman in her mid fifties, who has been married three times. She has a grown son from a previous marriage and has just recently married for the third time. She is a highly educated and articulate woman. She described her parents' relationship as negative and as a result had no expectation that any relationship would make her happy. As a young woman, she chose partners who were somewhat psychologically abusive and "bigger than life." She needed them to be important and claimed that,

"...they were like poets and artists and, you know, well known. I mean to me that was fairly important I suppose and nothing to do with emotional stability or constancy or any good qualities really."

Morgan believed that her mother was never really interested in her on a certain level,

"... one time she said to me your only good quality are your eyebrows."

She also spoke of her insecurity with her mother,

"...cause mom was, you know, kind of, I never knew what she was, or wasn't, I always felt that she would leave at any moment."

Morgan spoke of the relationship she found herself in with her parents and what she ultimately wanted for her mother,

"...well, my mom was always depressed and I would be the one that would kind of interface between her and my father, and I would defend her all the time... and I always felt I was trying to make my mom happy."

She also spoke of her needs and how mother couldn't meet them,

"...I mean my emotional needs just weren't met by my mom... I remember when I had my child she was hopeless. Or when my child was in a coma, after being hit by a car and she wouldn't come from Victoria to Vancouver when he was in a coma and they thought he was going to die because it was too much of a ferry ride... all she kept saying was, 'oh, he'll be fine.'"

Kerry

Kerry is a thirty-two year old male. He is unmarried and has no children. He works in social services and has many hobbies, including music and art. He reported believing that for many years something about him was different,

"...but deep down inside I thought I'm more special than these people around me. Not the healthy kind, like I'm special, like, but no that I'm, I used the word gifted but I'm just borrowing it... but I really felt that there was something different about me... but I have incredible low self-esteem... everything I do is about impressing someone..."

Kerry discussed his relationship with his parents and claimed that his father was hardly around and that he was very close, enmeshed in fact with his mother. He reported that he believed his mother was, *'clearly your closet narcissist.'*

"...my mom was expected to be the golden child... to fulfill all of her parents' wishes and dreams... she called herself sunshine... she was smiling, she was helping, she was just the perfect, you couldn't get more perfect, so perfect you wanted to kill her."

Kerry reported being triangulated into his parents' marriage and treated at times more as a partner to his mother than a son.

"...so in my home I basically knew my dad was a loser... I remember her telling me that as a kid... and then when I became a teen she would just talk to me over supper, she always talked about my dad."

Kerry explained how he believed his mother saw him,

"My mom always thought I was very special... but I was very special within a very narrow range... I was gifted so long as I stayed within that. I was her show, she was a producer of the show and I was the show. She'd guilt me for everything, but it wasn't about great marks in school, it was never about greatness, it was about as long as I was better than the other cousins so she was always seen as the better mother."

Kerry described what he wanted most from his parents,

"...I just wanted what everyone else wants, you know, my parents to look at me with real eyes and say, oh man, like you know wow, we're so lucky."

Judy

Judy is a thirty-five year old woman. She is unmarried and has no children, but has been in what she describes as *'the healthiest relationship I've ever had'* for the past six years. She described the majority of her relationships with men,

"I was so f-----ed up in relationships with guys. I'd ping pong back and forth between the ones who wanted me and the ones who I wanted. There never seemed to be much of an intersection between the two, and I was rarely happy for long in either."

When speaking about her family, she recalled how much of her childhood was spent trying to compensate for her parents' lack of self-esteem, by trying to make them happy and proud of her. She was very aware that they saw her as an extension of themselves,

"My parents, mainly my father would put me down when it suited him and would put me up on a pedestal when that suited him. I remember they were so threatened on the one hand, but also so proud when I got my bachelor's degree, being the first one in the family...so sometimes he'd say, 'this is my daughter, she just graduated from university' like when his boss was around, but other times he'd accuse me of using my degree to make him look stupid...its funny all I ever wanted was to make them happy, it was pretty confusing."

Judy commented about how this made her feel about herself,

"I felt like such a failure... no matter what I did or how hard I tried I just couldn't take away their pain and make them happy. On the contrary the more I tried, the more often I was seen as the villain and accused of hating them and wanting them

to look bad. It was just so painful and exhausting...and I grew up thinking I was the biggest bitch on the face of the earth.

She then commented on the enormity of the responsibility,

"...and my father often told me how I was the only ray of sunshine in his whole life."

Ingrid

Ingrid is a thirty-two year old artist. She is unmarried and childless. Ingrid claimed that she hadn't been in a serious relationship for five years. When she was in relationship in the past, one of her patterns would be to merge with her partners,

"...its like I don't know where I end and where they begin..."

She felt that her boundaries often ended up very fuzzy in relationship and she'd often have the experience of losing herself in relationship. She also claimed that she found it very challenging to just be herself in relationship,

"...its hard for me to just be myself, to trust myself to be spontaneous, to act on my feelings, you know, to just really like show up."

She recalled believing that her mother was very fragile all the time and that she couldn't handle too much emotionally. Ingrid was often the one to 'take care of her',

"... when my sister was away at school, I was like 17 or 18, and I had plans with my friends and she would just constantly, she would always ask me to stay home cause she didn't want to be alone..."

Ingrid also recalled an incident in which her mother tried to commit suicide, and how seemingly oblivious the mother was as to Ingrid's feelings or the impact such an event may have had on her daughter,

"...so anyways we ended up calling an ambulance and she went to the hospital and she got her stomach pumped and the next day I went there to pick her up and she didn't even say, like she barely, she didn't even say like I'm sorry or anything...there was no acknowledgement, nothing."

Ingrid recalled the lack of value her mother placed on her, as an individual,

"...I was never valued by my mother for who I was, I was valued for how I looked and for being creative, for things she was. I was mirrored for being like her."

"...I remember being 14 or 15 and I had just gone through puberty so I had breasts and I was in Florida with my mother and she was talking to a friend of hers and she pointed to me said something about, 'Look, its my old body.' And of course I just laughed and thought, wow, she must really love me."

Tyler

Tyler is a thirty-eight year old male. He has been married for the past two years and has no children. When asked to describe his partner he claimed,

"... I found a mate unfortunately like one of my parents, and this is distressing to me, because if I would have known this I probably would not have continued."

When describing his partner's family however, he claimed,

"that they are understanding people and they're trustworthy and they have integrity and they're giving people, which is, you know, it's nice. They do go out of their way for family which is something that I lacked growing up."

When describing the partners he has had in the past he revealed that,

"...the I don't give a s---t attitude that they had, that they would be willing to go for anything and that they really didn't have any conservatism or morals, you

know that they would basically go for any ride, well that's exactly what my parents are."

Tyler recalled instances of growing up in a family with a father, whom he referred to as Homer Simpson-esque,

"...well growing up when food was ordered, whatever was ordered had to be ordered, you know, first the parents had to like it...and basically I didn't have much of an opportunity to state what I wanted, it wasn't important."

Tyler had a difficult time in school as a youngster he recalled, and wondered how it affected his parents,

"...probably when I was changing a lot of schools and getting out of one school to another, it probably took a lot out of them...and I often focused on how am I ruining their life now."

Tyler often felt used by his parents financially, and felt that he had to meet not only their emotional needs, but their financial needs as well,

"...so whatever they had to do to get it [money], either manipulation, screaming, yelling, ah guilt, whatever it took to drag those dollars out of me they would do it...and the best part is that I would often feel so guilty making any emotional demands on them."

Lucia

Lucia is a thirty-something year old counsellor. She has been married for many years and is the mother of two children. She recalled her place in the family,

"...I think I was the favorite as I was the girl they finally wanted...both my parents having a special idea of girls so that sort of set me up as, in one way

special, but special in only a high functioning way...so I was special as long as I could function really strongly... the self that was bad or vulnerable or scared or hurt was um, there was really no real place for that. I was ashamed of just being human."

She went on to explain how that played out in her romantic relationships,

"...I think I spent quite a bit of my time afraid of being close and opening myself up...and I was angry because my needs weren't being met...I mean I had fights with this one guy that I've never seen in myself, they were kind of the fights I would have, the same kind of anger I feel towards my mom."

She claimed that the love she felt from her parents was quite conditional, in fact.

She spoke of her mother and the lack of mirroring she got from her,

"...so there was no mirroring back to me of what it means to be a woman, I didn't know what it meant to be a woman."

As she entered in relationships with various partners, she found the same dynamic to be playing out,

"um, they treated me really well, for who they saw me as, I don't think I felt fulfilled, I don't think I felt a deep sense of who I was in those relationships."

Lucia described a time when her parents' marriage was quite rocky. She claimed that she played a key role for her father during that time; she felt as if her father really *"brought her in and left her mother out in the cold."* She also believed that her father transferred many of the wifely needs onto her.

"...emotionally I almost felt like a partner and I know I was for him, I know I really was for him."

Her mother was someone whom she had trouble trusting emotionally. She did not believe that she could trust her mother emotionally. She recounted this story,

"...I remember when my dad came to tell me that my cat had been hit by a car...when he left, I remember seeing my mom looking at me from her bedroom and she burst into tears and ran to the bathroom...and I remember thinking, wait a minute, I want you here, I want you comforting me, it was my cat that just got hit...and this was a very strong moment for me and what I took from this is if something happens that breaks my heart that its up to me to deal with it."

Themes in the Romantic Relationships of Adult Children of Covertly Narcissistic

Families

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF THEMES AND CATEGORIES

Themes	Categories
1. Insecurity in Relationships	a) Partners chosen/attracted to b) How they coped/compensated for insecurity c) Beliefs about themselves/their partner
2. Difficulty with Intimacy in Relationships	a) Struggles with authenticity and self love b) Struggles with communicating needs and feelings c) Struggles with emotional tenacity
3. Unrealistic Expectations in Relationships	a) Expectations of self b) Expectations of partner c) Expectations of relationship
4. Negative/Precarious Sense of Self in Relationships	a) Acting out of negative/precarious sense of self in relationship b) How they compensated for this sense of self c) Meaning of this sense of self regarding their relationships
5. Repeating Unhealthy Family of Origin Dynamics in Relationships	a) Similarity of partner to parent b) Similarity of feelings/needs in relationship to feelings/needs in family of origin c) Similarity of actions in relationship to actions in family of origin

Theme One: Insecurity In Relationships

"...the first thing I really felt about myself in relationship was, at any moment this girl is going to reject me...I can't even tell you why, if its because I've got no money or cause I've got a zit, because you name it, the first thing is complete insecurity."

This theme emerged almost immediately for me. It was very clear to me as I conducted the interviews that this is a common experience that kept coming up again and again in reference to the participants' romantic relationships. Many of the participants spoke of their fears in relationship and many of these fears seemed to reflect the overall insecurity that was omnipresent in the relationships. There were three main ways that this theme was illustrated, and these distinct ways were then classified into the following categories: (a) Partners chosen/attracted to, (b) How they coped/compensated for insecurity, and (c) Beliefs about myself/partner that amplified insecurity.

Partners chosen/attracted to.

"...I have very intense extremes of, seeing the person really like a God, you know, just seeing this guy is just so spectacular, like just really overwhelmed."

All of the participants chose or were attracted to partners who made it really easy to feel insecure in the relationship. Morgan, Tyler and Judy picked very physically attractive partners. This, as it turns out was very similar to how their parents valued them. *"I was never valued for who I was, I was valued for how I looked."* Ingrid recalled, *"My mother pointed at me and said something about, 'Look its my old body', and I thought, wow, she must really love me."* Kerry, Tyler and Judy picked partners who often possessed positive qualities that they were lacking. Kerry, Ingrid, Lucia and Judy tended

to choose partners who they deemed powerful. Power was something that a child would have difficulty acquiring in the narcissistic family. Tyler stated, *"And basically I didn't have much of an opportunity to state what I wanted, it wasn't important."* Three of the six participants chose emotionally unavailable partners. One of the participants claimed that his mother was terribly needy emotionally while he was growing up, and he claimed that he tended to shy away from such partners in adulthood.

How they coped/compensated for insecurity.

"...yeah, there's always a piece of me that sets up the escape road to make sure that if I get in trouble that I can pull the escape hatch and get out of it."

Six out of the six participants reported that they were usually the one to break up the relationship first. Tyler reported that he would create an escape route for himself if he had reason to believe that he would be hurt. Lucia reported that she often held back emotionally as protection. This was something that she did as a child as well in order to survive. *"Within my family, well, the self that was bad or vulnerable or scared or hurt...well there was really no place for that or for the vulnerability, or the softness or the trust."* Four of the six responded that they used sex as a way of increasing their sense of self-esteem in the relationship, and many of the participants reported being valued in their family of origin for external qualities. Some of the participants reported feeling like adult partners of their opposite sex parent. One participant believed that she could have control within this realm, and as a result used this area of strength to gain more control in her romantic relationships too. Lucia recalled believing that, *"Emotionally I felt like a partner to my father...I know I really was that for him."* All six of the participants reported that they acted better than or unlike themselves in relationship. This is similar to

the ways that they acted as children, in order to be accepted and valued by their parents. Judy stated, *"So, I realized pretty fast that I couldn't just be me and be loved."* Tyler, Judy, Lucia and Ingrid all agreed that they avoided showing their vulnerable sides in relationship. They all reported an inability to trust the parent system in childhood. It also speaks to their perception that they wouldn't get love as long as they were perceived as weak by their parents. Three of the six reported that they put their partner's needs first and their own needs second in the relationship. This is precisely what they did in their family of origin, however as children, they put their parents' needs ahead of their own. *"I was always trying to make my mom happy."* Three of the six participants recounted that they gained an identity through their partner. For Morgan at least, this seemed to stem from her childhood, *"I was just kind of a pale shadow of my mother."* Five participants claimed that they lost themselves in the relationship. The participants reported that this precarious sense of self originated from the family of origin. Many of the participants reported needing to cut off from who they really were, in order to be loved and valued by the parent system.

Beliefs about themselves/their partner.

"...well I think one of the biggest struggles is also to, to know that I'm, that I'm worthy of being loved, you know, that I'm lovable."

Ingrid, Tyler and Judy all reported struggling with feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. Many of the participants claimed these feelings originated in the family of origin and got played out in romantic relationships. Morgan stated, *"I had no sense of feeling attractive or intelligent or nice or anything."* Morgan, Judy and Ingrid often felt unlovable and unworthy in relationships. They reported getting this message about who

they were from their parents. Judy recalled, *"I can't even count how many times my father told me what a bitch I was...and I grew up thinking I was the biggest bitch on the face of the earth."* Three of the six participants believed that their partner would leave them. Morgan claimed, *"I always felt she [my mother] would leave at any moment."* It seems that this fear originated within the family of origin. Four of the six respondents claimed that they often felt overly accountable or responsible for the troubles in the relationship. Many of the participants claimed that they felt this way as children, toward their parents. Morgan claimed, *"At the time, I believed that there was something wrong with me and that's why she didn't care."* Kerry claimed, *"I thought I was so f---ed up and I used to walk around at 14 or 15 thinking why am I so bloody selfish, why can't I listen to my mom.... I felt guilty from the moment I woke up."* Judy and Ingrid often worried that they weren't enough for their partners. As children, these participants reported worrying about the same thing, and it seemed to have spilled over into adulthood. Finally, three of the six participants believed that they would be rejected for showing their true self, or for what they lacked. As children, these individuals claimed they struggled with the same fears. Kerry said, *"My mom thought I was special so long as I stayed within a certain range... so if I dropped out of high school to follow my gift of art let's say, then forget it."*

Theme Two: Difficulty With Intimacy in Relationships

"...sometimes I had a really hard time taking in the caring, you know, and kind of breaking through on my own, you know, my own fears and my own walls, the intimacy, I just couldn't break through..."

This theme speaks to the problems that the participants seemed to encounter when faced with intimacy in general. The difficulties they had stemmed from a lack of the resources necessary to have and sustain intimacy as well as the personal issues that they brought into the relationship from their family of origin. Many of the participants felt uneasy with intimacy, and the meanings that they created around intimacy were troublesome. In fact, it appeared they often sabotaged the possibility for intimacy. The theme seemed to naturally cluster into three main categories: (a) struggles with authenticity and self-love, (b) struggles with communicating needs and feelings and (c) struggles with emotional tenacity.

Struggles with authenticity and self-love.

"... I'll keep rejecting women because if they fall for me, they're falling for someone that I would reject."

Lucia and Judy reported that they felt that they had to be 'on' all the time in relationship. Lucia reported, *"I was special to my parents as long as I could function really strongly...their approval was very conditional."* It seems then that this belief or habit stemmed from the narcissistic family. Six of the six participants found themselves acting like someone or something they weren't. Growing up the participants reported they believed they had to cast aside who they really were in order to gain love and acceptance and to fulfill their parents' dreams and make them happy. Lucia, Tyler, Judy and Ingrid all avoided showing any vulnerability in the relationship. Many of the participants reported that vulnerability was unsafe to show within their family of origin. Judy recalled, *"I remember once writing my mother a letter about how I felt, after we had had a fight and my brother later told me that she read it aloud to him and to my dad in a*

dramatic and mocking voice.” Three of the six participants reported acting as if they were the one in control in the relationship. As I’ve learned through the interviews, many of the participants felt an appalling lack of control as children within their families. Three of the six respondents claimed they often felt inferior and inadequate in intimate situations. As I learned, many of the participants learned they were inadequate as children, especially when they tried to make their parents happy, usually to no avail. Tyler claimed, *“And I remember feeling like a failure because I couldn’t make my parents happy.”* Morgan, Tyler and Judy all admitted to feeling like a fake in relationship. From the interviews, I learned that many of the participants felt out of touch with who they were as children too, and as a result could very easily have felt like a fake. Two of the six found it hard to feel worthy or lovable. Most of the participants recalled childhood as a time wrought with feelings of unworthiness. Kerry claimed, *“Of course no one’s ever really rejected me on these things, its all what my parents put in my head.”*

Struggles with communicating needs and feelings.

“...I remember my heart pounding and feeling so nervous just thinking about telling him that I missed him and wanted to see him again that weekend...and we had already been together for about six or seven months.”

Lucia and Judy reported that they often felt afraid of being close and opening themselves up in their relationships. As children, this was something that they learned was an unsafe thing to do. Lucia recalled an incident that illustrates this well. *“My cat had been hit by a car, and I remember seeing my mom looking at me from her bedroom and she burst into tears and ran to the bathroom...and I remember thinking wait a minute, I want you hear, I want you comforting me...what I took from this is if something*

happens that breaks my heart that its up to me to deal with it." Kerry, Lucia and Judy all admitted that they chose (and often sought out) emotionally unavailable partners. Both Kerry and Lucia spoke to the fact that, as children, they often felt like spouses to the parent of the opposite sex. Kerry believed his mother was very emotionally needy. Four of the six participants stated that they used sex as a way of gaining intimacy. Because so many of the participants were valued by their parents for how they looked, they may have learned that using their body was one of the best ways to gain love and intimacy from a romantic partner. Ingrid, Lucia, Tyler and Judy had difficulty figuring out what their needs were in relationship. Many of the participants reported putting the needs of their parents ahead of their own. As a result, many of them became estranged from their own needs, and as adults had trouble getting back in touch with them after so many years. Morgan, Tyler and Judy had trouble trusting their partners. As children, many of the participants recalled having difficulty trusting the adults in their lives. Many of the parents they've already described were in fact unworthy of their trust. Six of the six participants often felt angry and proceeded to take this anger out on their partners. Perhaps the anger was used in lieu of articulating their needs to their partners. Personally speaking, as an adult child of a narcissistic family, much of my anger is about my own frustration around my inability to get my needs met. Finally, three of the six acted cold, critical and blaming of their partners. For me, as a participant in this research, this speaks to my inability to get my needs across in a calm and healthy manner. The frustration that ensues is then directed at my romantic partner.

Struggles with emotional tenacity.

"...every time I get even this much bored in the relationship, I break off the

relationship."

Kerry and Tyler both admitted to being easily bored in relationships. Some of the Participants spoke to the challenge and excitement of the chase at the beginning of the relationship. Perhaps this is reminiscent of the struggle to get the love of the parent system. Also, because many of the participants struggled with low self-esteem, a partner who showed interest in them could have been perceived as less than, by association. *"I'd never be a member of any club that would have me."* Kerry found the boredom to be very painful and totally intolerable since it reminded him of life at home, growing up. Kerry stated, *"My mom cooked me supper and it seemed very serious and very boring.. I think anything that almost resembled what my parents did, I didn't want to do...going for supper, never went out for supper on a my date...that's what its like when you have two people modeling boredom for you, for 30 years of your life."* All of the participants confessed that they were usually the one to break up with their partner first. This speaks to the pain of having been rejected by the parent system. As a participant in this research, I would break up first so that I would ensure I would not let myself be rejected as an adult, like I was as a child. Kerry, Judy, Lucia, Tyler and Ingrid all stated that they felt turned off by partners who requested more closeness or who showed more interest in them. Because many of the participants struggled with low self-esteem from childhood, they learned that anyone who would be interested in them couldn't be worthy. In essence, they were unaccustomed to anyone who treated them differently from their parents. Four of the six replied that they often experienced very wide ranges of feelings toward their partner, even over the course of a single day and had difficulty maintaining good feelings at all. Some of the participants reported feeling wide ranges of feelings towards their

parent system as well. This is how the participants were used to feeling. Judy claimed, *"I remember lots of times feeling so angry with my mother, but also feeling so sorry and compassionate for her at the same time."* This was all about putting the needs of the parents ahead of the needs of the participants. Two of the six stated that they needed lots of emotional space in relationships. Many of the participants recalled being treated as an emotional partner to their opposite sex parent. This is a lot of a responsibility for a child at such a young age. Kerry stated the following, *"My mom was and still is extremely needy emotionally, and I almost feel like I've had a wife already who was needy."*

Morgan, Kerry and Tyler often felt trapped in relationships.

Theme Three: Unrealistic Expectations in Relationships

"...and I remember thinking, all I have to do is get this guy to marry me, and my whole life would be fine...he'd wipe out all the pain from the past."

This theme emerged as the participants spoke of all the things that they expected would happen or change as a result of the relationship, and of all the pressure that they put on themselves and on the relationship. Most of the participants had very high expectations of everyone involved and often beat themselves up if they or the relationship couldn't meet these standards. There was an overall sense that they created these ideas from their perceptions around their family of origin experiences. Many of the following codes also seem to reflect what the participants did as youngsters within their own narcissistic families. The following three categories emerged: (a) expectations of self, (b) expectations of partner and (c) expectations of relationship.

Expectations of self.

"...I'd be the perfect wife, I mean the really perfect wife, you know. I would work full time, I would cook out of Julia Child, I would, I would, I would be great..."

Morgan, Tyler and Judy all admitted that they often put their own needs second in their relationships. This was something that they reported learning to do within their family of origin. Kerry reported, *"My mom would talk about all her stories and my dad wouldn't listen and she wouldn't even stop, she'd just start talking to me and my brother and there was this triangle, so my dad would sit there and she'd talk to us."* Ingrid recounted that, *"...so we ended up calling an ambulance and we took her to the hospital and she got her stomach pumped and the next day I went to pick her up and she didn't even say I'm sorry or anything...there was no acknowledgement for what I went through."* Four of the six responded that they avoided showing their partners any emotional vulnerability. In childhood, the participants learned that this was unsafe and often unattractive to do around their parents. Naturally they took this notion with them into adulthood. Five of the six reported that they often blamed themselves for what went wrong in the relationship. Kerry claimed, *"...cause she always, she would make me feel like horrible, she was like, what's wrong with you, you can't take any pleasure in your mom."* Lucia and Judy claimed that they felt the need to be 'on' at all times during the relationship. Lucia remembered how she felt as a youngster, *"I think the love was conditional, I had to be positive, um, disciplined, um, strong, self-sufficient and um responsible."* Six of the six participants recalled acting better than they were bordering on perfect in the relationship. This seemed to be reflective of how they learned to get love as children. Kerry recalled, *"...and I remember my dad asking me when he could call me*

a doctor, and I said, 'Dad, I'm not gonna be.' That's all they wanted me to be." Morgan and Judy claimed that they usually tried to read or analyze their partners' unspoken thoughts or actions. This is something that quite a few of the participants needed to do with their own parents. Judy recalled, *"It was so hard to know what was going on or what was going to happen in the house, I had to figure a lot of it out on my own. I remember analyzing a lot about my family before I was a teenager, trying to understand what made them so crazy...no wonder I wanted to be a therapist, I've been practicing since I was a kid."*

Expectations of partner.

"...so I end up blaming the other person for not meeting my needs...needs that aren't even ever brought up."

Ingrid, Lucia and Tyler all felt that they expected their partner to know their needs even if they didn't. I believe that this speaks to the participants' tendency to project mother or father onto the romantic interest. As very young children, we expected mother/father to be there to meet all of our needs, without having to verbalize what those needs were. Quite possibly, the narcissistic families described in this study were unable to meet this challenge. One of the six reported that they expected mirroring from their partner. *Ingrid reported that, "...and with my mother there was a real lack of reflection, a lack of mirroring, she would look to me for her own reflection."* Clearly this was something that was lacking in the family of origin. Three of the six used their partner to help themselves gain identities. As children, some of the participants reported that they lacked identities and looked to their parents to tell them who and what they should be. Kerry recalled feeling, *"...and I was her show, she was the producer of a show and I was*

the show." He also recalled, *"and like my mom and my dad I used my external things, not my internal things to get accepted and respected."* Six of the six discussed taking their anger out on their partners. It seems that this anger was directed at mother or father, but since it was often unsafe to feel such negative emotions toward the parent system, it got taken out on the love interests. Kerry stated, *"and all that anger that I felt for my mother came out on other women in relationships, and it couldn't come out on my mother because I needed her in order to survive...and later on I felt too sorry for her."* Ingrid, Lucia and Judy claimed that they blamed their partners for their own needs failing to be met. Finally, Ingrid revealed that she often saw her partners as godlike. The parents who constituted the narcissistic family system may have had an inflated sense of self-importance, and could have had a pattern of fantasized grandiosity. It could have been plausible that the children viewed their own parents as godlike as well. This was something that could have easily been learned and experienced in childhood and repeated in adulthood.

Expectations of relationship.

"...so I would channel into the relationship every creative ounce, every seductive every ounce of, of passion and anger and everything...but it turned out the relationship couldn't define all my happiness."

Judy and Kerry reported making their relationships the focus of their lives. Perhaps in some way they learned from their parents that it was normal to make others the focus of a life. Judy recalled, *"I felt as if my mother depended on me for so much of her life... I often felt that she made her kids the focus of her life."* Four of the six claimed they used sex as a way of gaining intimacy. As children many of these participants

learned that their external qualities were more valuable than their internal qualities. Kerry also reported, *"I learned the art of seduction from my mom."* Morgan, Kerry, Tyler and Judy all remembered using sex as a way of increasing their self-esteem. The participants felt valued by their parents for how they looked, therefore it made sense that they would use their bodies to make themselves feel good about who they were as adults. Two of the six noted that they used their relationship as an outlet for their anger, passion and creativity. One participant claimed that the pain, passion, and creativity needed an outlet, and since it was unfit to share with his parents for fear of rejection, it was expressed in the relationship. Kerry recalled, *"They [my parents] never had any interest in my army stuff, they never asked me any questions about my passions. I always felt that deep down inside my creative side is a curse...it didn't get me what I wanted...and I just wanted my parents to look at me with real eyes and say...we're so lucky."* He also felt, *"an unbelievable amount of rage and anger towards her."* Three of the six responded that they used the relationship to acquire an identity and be seen. As children many of the participants reported that they lacked an identity and most of them felt somewhat invisible within their family system. Morgan claimed, *"The message I got from my childhood was just to be invisible."* Kerry expected not to feel bored in a relationship. As a child, he claimed that he witnessed intense boredom between his parents and thought, *"...almost anything that resembled what my parents did, I didn't want to do."* Finally Judy felt that she used her relationships to gain acceptance. She reported that she never felt accepted for who she was as a child by her family. She claimed, *"I was rejected for being the one who did well in school and for being the one who had a lot of friends, because the rest of the family never achieved those things."* What Judy failed to realize

though that no matter who accepted her romantically, she would still have difficulty feeling acceptable and accepted by her family of origin.

Theme Four: Negative/Precarious Sense of Self in Relationships

"I guess if they love me, that's a real turn-off."

"...I was so needy, I had no identity beyond him."

This theme coursed through all of the data, and permeated the majority of the participants' experiences. Many of the participants had a low sense of self-esteem and a fragile sense of self. This theme played out in number of ways; how they made meaning of their relationships, what they did in relationships, who they chose as partners, how they saw themselves, and the expectations that they had of themselves in relationship. This theme clustered into three categories: (a) acting out of the negative/precarious sense of self in relationship, (b) how they compensated for this sense of self and (c) meaning of this sense of self regarding their relationships.

Acting out of negative/precarious sense of self in relationship.

"...I just end up merging with people, its like I don't know where I end and they begin type of thing."

One of the six participants reported that she needed mirroring from her relationships. This was something that was lacking from the family of origin experience. Lucia claimed, *"there was no mirroring back to me of what it meant to be a woman."* All six participants admitted that they acted like someone or something they weren't, better than who they believed they really were. This was a pattern that many of the participants learned to do within their families in order to be accepted and loved. Kerry claimed, *"I shut parts of myself off, the geeky, curious creative kid that I was when I was*

a child...my parents never valued that." Morgan, Lucia, Tyler and Judy all put their partners needs before their own. Many of the participants claimed that they did the very same thing with their parents. Three of the six found they disappeared/got lost in relationships. Many of the participants recalled feeling invisible in the face of the parent system, as well. Also because they were busy meeting the needs of their parents, their own feelings and needs were often ignored. Morgan, Ingrid and Judy all found it challenging to feel worthy and lovable in relationship. Many of the participants felt unworthy and unlovable as children. Morgan recalled the following incident, *"I remember when I was like four or five and I was running in the backyard and I fell down and broke my knee and I couldn't move...and I'd say, 'Mom, I can't move' and she'd go, 'Oh yes you can.' And my memory is that I lay there for three hours until she came out and got me...she really didn't um, care really."* Two of the six felt like a fake, or an imposter in the relationship. The participants reported that in childhood, they had to hide parts of themselves and pretend they were something or someone that they weren't in order to be accepted by the parent system. Kerry and Judy believed that their whole identity was wrapped up in their sexuality. As children, many of these participants were only valued for how they looked. Ingrid recalled an incident in which her mother pointed at her breasts and said, *"Look, its my old body."* Four of the six felt overly responsible for the relationships' problems. As children, the participants claimed that they often took on too much responsibility for their parents' problems, oftentimes believing if they were just better or stronger that they could have made their parents happy. Lucia and Judy felt they put up with a lot of shit in relationship. As I read through the transcripts I noticed that many of the participants seemed to have put up with a lot as youngsters too. Some

learned that their parents were too fragile emotionally to do anything else. Ingrid thought, *"She's so fragile, her life is a struggle, am I going to give her more grief?"*

How they compensated for this sense of self.

"...I would seek out, not consciously, it would just happen, but I would notice the girls who had low self esteem...I really wanted the cool girl but was too scared of getting rejected...so I'd go after other girls who were so cute and all this kind of stuff, but they were the ones who were looking to validate their own sense of self esteem with their bodies...and it was a perfect dysfunctional dance."

Four of the six participants chose physically attractive partners. Their parents had taught them that this trait was valuable, since many of the participants were valued for their physical qualities. Morgan recalled, *"one time she said to me the only good quality are your eyebrows."* Two of the six chose partners who needed them. Many of the participants felt needed by their parents too. Kerry recalled how emotionally needy his mother and father both were. He also claimed, *"My parents needed me there, like I mean they needed me there because I don't think they had any other reason really to exist."*

Kerry and Tyler reported that they chose partners with low self-esteem. Many of the participants grew up feeling a lack of self-esteem. It appears that many of the parents also had low self-esteem. With this in mind, it would seem quite appropriate to choose a partner with a familiar nature. Kerry claimed, *"I have an incredible low self-esteem."*

Judy, Tyler, Morgan and Kerry all used sex as a way of increasing their self-esteem. As youngsters, the participants recalled they were taught that their physical bodies were valuable. Kerry and Judy claimed they morphed into whatever they had to be as a means of gaining acceptance. This was a similar activity to what they did as children to gain

acceptance from their parents. Two of the six felt a need to impress their partners. Many of the participants claimed they desperately wanted to impress their parents, but felt they rarely did. I think this speaks to the idea of projection; that is the feelings and needs that the participants had for their parents got transferred onto their partners. Kerry claimed, *"I just wanted my parents to look at me with real eyes and say, oh man, we're so lucky."*

Three of the six gained an identity through their partners. Growing up, many of the participants gained a sense of identity through their parents. They cut out parts of themselves that were unacceptable to their parents and played up the parts that were favorable. In essence they fabricated the identity that was most useful to them. Five of the six participants claimed they had mostly long-term relationships. Perhaps this gave the participants a sense of stability that they lacked at home as youngsters. Perhaps it also gave the participants a sense of belonging that they too seemed to lack as children.

Meaning of this sense of self regarding their relationships.

"... if I showed them [partners] the heartbreak, they're going to um, they're not going to want to deal with it, you're just gonna drive them away."

Three of the six participants reported feeling inferior and inadequate as they were in relationships. Many of the participants claimed that this was something that they learned about themselves from their family of origin. Morgan felt like, *"a pale shadow of my mother."* Morgan, Tyler and Kerry felt like failures. Some of the participants recalled feeling the same way as children because they felt they failed to make their parents happy. Tyler claimed, *"and I felt like such a failure because I couldn't even make them happy."* Four of the six believed that they were only attractive to their partners physically. Many of the participants recalled they only felt attractive to their parents in

the physical sense as well. Five of the six claimed they believed they would be rejected for showing their true self. Most of the participants were rejected by their parents for being who they really were. Lucia recalled, *"I was ok as long as I was tough, the empathy was based on, I know you're tough and I know that you can handle it."* Three of the six often feared that their partners would leave them. Some of the participants experienced the same fears as children within their families. Kerry recalled that, *"my parents would fight and they threatened to leave each other a bunch of times, but they never did."* Morgan recalled feeling that, *"I always felt she [mother] would leave at any moment."* Lucia and Judy felt that they had to be 'on' all the time in order to be accepted. They reported feeling quite the same around their parents. Ingrid and Judy believed they weren't enough as is. Many of the participants recalled receiving either verbal or nonverbal messages from their parents that they weren't enough as is.

Theme Five: Repeating Unhealthy Family of Origin Dynamics in Relationships

"...well, I just never got close enough to those men...I think I was holding them at arm's length, cause that's how I held my parents and how they held me."

This last theme was very evident from the interviews and the transcripts. Many of the unresolved conflicts, needs and feelings for the participants were getting played out in their relationships from their choices of partners, to what they assumed was going on in the relationships, to the feelings that they carried over from childhood and projected onto their romantic partners. It seemed as if the participants were recreating the old situations with the hope of healing the original family of origin wounds in their adult romantic relationships. The theme clustered into three main categories: (a) similarity of partner to

parent, (b) similarity of feelings/needs in relationship to feelings/needs in family of origin and (c) similarity of actions in relationship to actions in family of origin.

Similarity of partner to parent.

"...I guess I always picked women who had this 'I don't give a shit' attitude... that they'd be willing to go for anything and that they really didn't have any, you know, conservatism or morals, or they, you know, they would basically go for any ride...well that's exactly what my parents are."

Five of the six participants claimed that they chose partners who were similar to or reminded them of their parents. Perhaps the participants projected images of mother and father onto their partners. As one of the participants, I know I used my relationships to try to meet my unmet childhood needs. In essence, I believe that I was still striving for mother and father's acceptance. I was trying, albeit futilely to go back and heal the original wound. As such, I created many of the same unhealthy patterns. I believe that I was indeed stuck in transference and wonder if any of the other participants felt the same way. Two of the six reported that they chose partners who were in control. Some of the participants had parents who were also in control or controlling. Kerry, Lucia and Judy found that they picked emotionally unavailable partners. Many of the participants described their parents as being the same way. Two of the six opted for partners who needed them. A few of the participants had parents who needed them. Lucia found that she chose partners who treated her similarly to how her parents treated her. Her parents valued her strength and smarts and many of her partners also valued her for those characteristics. Four of the six stated that they tended to choose powerful partners. Many of the participants found their parents powerful. Kerry claimed, *"I have no doubt in my*

mind that my mom was so overpowering, so indwelt in my life." Two of the participants chose narcissistic partners. They claimed that their parents too had narcissistic tendencies. Kerry stated that, *"My mom was clearly your closet narcissist."* Kerry chose partners with low self-esteem. His mother and father both suffered from low self-esteem.

Similarity of feelings/needs in relationship to feelings/needs in family of origin.

"...so it's a real kind of parent/child thing where I expect that they know what I need even when I don't."

Five out of six participants claimed that they had a need to be accepted for who they were. This was precisely their need as children. Ingrid felt she needed mirroring from her partners. She claimed that she also needed mirroring from her mother, which unfortunately she never got. Ingrid, Lucia and Judy all found it difficult to be themselves in relationship. These participants also claimed they found it hard to be themselves within their family of origin. All six of the participants felt angry in their relationships. Many of the participants felt intense anger toward their parents as well. Lucia claimed, *"I had fights with this one guy...the same kind of anger I feel towards my mom."* Five of the six had a fear of being rejected for who they were in relationship. These participants reported similar fears as children in front of their parents. These fears often came to fruition within the family system. Ingrid and Judy yearned to be seen for who they were. Many of the participants yearned to be seen and accepted by their parents for who they really were. Two of the six worried that they weren't enough as is. Some of the participants received that very message from their parents. Morgan and Judy felt a need for high drama in their relationships. There was a similar dynamic within their family of origin. Judy recalled,

"My mother was a drama queen and there was so much drama in the house growing up."

Many narcissistic families have an element of high drama. Ingrid and Judy felt out of touch with their own needs. Both of these participants felt out of touch with their needs as children since they tended to be overly focused on the needs of the parent system. Finally Kerry often felt disgust toward women. He recalled, as a teenager, looking at his mother and saying, *"you're f-----en pathetic, 'I was like 15 at the time...and I think it's very clearly tied into the disgust that I get with women sometimes."*

Similarity of actions in relationship to actions in family of origin.

"...cause I thought if I show my mother heartbreak, she's gonna freak out, she's gonna think it's her problem, she's gonna distance herself from me when I need her the most, and so I think I brought that into the relationship, if I showed them [men] heartbreak, it means I won't get close."

Two of the six participants shut parts of themselves off. These participants found themselves shutting parts of themselves off as children too, in order to be accepted by their parents. Four of the six participants valued external qualities when choosing a partner. Many of these participants were valued for their external qualities by their parents. Many narcissistic families are preoccupied with consistent fantasies of beauty. Four of the six took on too much responsibility for their relationships working. As children, these participants took on too much responsibility for their parents' feelings and moods. Ingrid, Tyler and Judy had enmeshed relationships. Many of the participants had enmeshed relationships with their parents. *"I was very close with my mom, enmeshed, there was no question I was enmeshed with my mom."* Lucia and Judy found they couldn't ask their partners for support or help. Some of the participants also believed that

they couldn't ask their parents for support or help either, lest they be construed as weak and needy. All six of the participants acted like someone or something they weren't. All of the participants recalled acting unlike themselves as children in order to be accepted by their parents. The narcissistic family has trouble accepting children who are not up to standard because they see the children as extensions of themselves. Therefore if the children aren't up to standard then ipso facto, neither are the parents. Five of the six put their needs second behind their partner's. The needs of the narcissistic family took precedence over the needs of the children, too. Morgan and Judy tried to read and analyze their partners. This was similar to what they had to do as children. Many of the parents' messages were too cryptic to be known. Four of the six avoided showing vulnerability in relationship, and this was something they hid from their parents as well. Lucia acted in relationship the way her parents wanted her to act. She acted strong and disciplined, the narcissistic family expected no less from her. Finally, Lucia, Tyler and Judy all gained self worth by being the one to listen to their partner's problems. Within the narcissistic family system the needs of the parents are the focus. Many of the participants often found themselves listening to the problems and needs of their parents. Kerry recalled, "*my mom would always talk to me about my dad, she told me how she didn't think she wanted to marry my dad when she was younger.*"

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss my ideas about the results and the findings of this study in relation to: literature on romantic love, literature on the narcissistic family, literature on the parentified child and literature on the clinical research findings. Other new and noteworthy findings to emerge from this research will be examined and the meanings of the findings will be examined. I will then discuss the significance of the research, the implications for future research, and the implications for the counseling profession. An examination of the limitations to the study will bring this report to its conclusion.

Any links made to the existing literature as well as any inferences made about the results are done with the knowledge that the themes yielded from this study reflect, primarily the experiences of the six participants. It is imperative that the reader discerns for him/herself whether or not these themes resonate with the experiences of other people who have been brought up in a similar type of family. It was I, the researcher who imposed these themes. It is important to note that another researcher may have discovered entirely different themes. The imposition of themes is a very subjective exercise. Wolcott (1994) speaks to this when he writes about the interpretive process. He claims that themes are not found, discovered or uncovered, rather, they are imposed by the researcher. Therefore, it is necessary for the reader to judge whether or not these themes can be seen beyond the context of the six people who were interviewed.

I was pleased with the diversity of the participants. There were men and women, some were younger, and some were older, with professions as diversified as entrepreneurs, artists and helpers.

Links to the Literature on Romantic Love

Brennan and Shaver's (1995) assumption was that adult attachment style, an orientation to relationships thought to be determined by childhood relationships with parents, affects the experience of romantic love. This notion is clearly supported by the findings of this study. Theme five, the tendency to repeat family of origin dynamics in the romantic relationship speaks to this issue. It was evident that all of the participants, in one way or another, were affected by their relationships with their parents, so much so that they found themselves choosing similar partners, experiencing similar feelings and doing or not doing the same things with partners as they had done as children with their parents.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) discovered that romantic love is experienced differently by different people because of variations in attachment histories. This too seems to have been supported by the findings in this study. The attachment histories of the participants were similar-- all coming from the covertly narcissistic family, and the results seemed to imply that they experienced romantic love in quite similar ways. From those findings, we might also imply that the participants from this study were more likely to have been reared with either anxious or avoidant attachment styles, since they all spoke to experiencing lack of trust, and emotional ups and downs. It is highly doubtful that any of the participants in this study emerged from families in which the attachment style was secure. (This point will be addressed further in the implications for future

research section). From this study however, we learned little of the experiences of these anxious and avoidant types. I believe that my research has indeed filled in this gap. I believe that most, if not all of the participants emerged from anxious or avoidant families, and this study has given much insight into their experiences.

Feeney and Noller (1990) studied whether or not it was possible to use attachment style as a predictor of adult love relationships. Indeed, they found that they were able to do so. My study supports this finding. The participants emerged from similar family of origins and experienced most of same themes in romantic relationships. This finding has an interesting implication for counseling. With the addition of this research to the field, we as counselors can better understand the covertly narcissistic offspring, and as such, may be able to forewarn them about the chances that their romantic choices may indeed create more trouble in their lives than they may be prepared to handle.

Links to the Narcissistic Family Literature

The findings of this study echo much of the anecdotal literature presented by Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994). They found that children of covertly narcissistic families learn that their feelings are of little or negative value, and begin to detach from and lose touch with them. Many of my participants reported putting their needs and feelings secondary in their romantic relationships, and many of them also claimed to be uncertain as to what those needs even were. The authors also found that those children struggled to satisfy the needs of their parents, much like trying to hit a moving target, and that they felt responsible for correcting the situation. Because they often lacked the tools to do so, they began to develop a sense of failure. My findings reflect these assumptions as well. Many of the participants repeated the same dynamics

within their romantic relationships, that is, they took on too much responsibility in their relationships, they attempted to read and analyze their partners' needs with the hope of meeting them, and many reported feeling like failures.

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) predicted that for the child of the narcissistic family, intimate relationships would be problematic. The lack of trust for self and others, and the emotional walls erected in order to survive would likely impede most chances for a healthy, intimate relationship. The findings of this study support this contention. The theme *difficulty with intimacy* emerged naturally for me from the data. The participants claimed that they did not trust that their partners would not reject them. Some also admitted to feeling like a fake in the relationship, and many reported hiding their true selves behind the facades they had erected. Children from the narcissistic home could not get their needs met or even express their needs and feelings appropriately. As adults, my participants echoed the same dilemmas. Many of them could not figure out what their needs were, and often resorted to anger when they finally did try to express these needs.

Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) report that an inversion process begins in the narcissistic family. The responsibility for meeting needs gradually shifts from the parent to the child. My findings support that this continues in the romantic relationship. Most of my participants put their partners' needs ahead of their own, much the same way they put their parents' needs ahead of their own. This was the only way the child was able to gain acceptance and approval, and it would have been interesting to ask the participants what they got out of this as adults. Many of the children became extensions of their parents, and an interesting parallel can be drawn from this research since many of

the participants spoke of the merging experience with romantic partners. One of the participants described it as *"not knowing where they end and I begin."*

One of the categories under the *difficulty with intimacy* theme is an inability to communicate feelings and needs. Similarly, Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) found that the rules of the narcissistic family system often discouraged open communication of feelings by the children. The authors supported my findings when they posited that the habit of denying and stifling feelings in childhood would cause problems later on in adulthood. Indeed the findings of my study suggest that my participants failed to get back that right that never did exist for them in childhood.

Interestingly, Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994) found that many of their clients reported that they never could have real conversations with their parents. If, as children, they wanted to talk about their feelings, the parents would often end up giving advice and shutting them down. Half of the participants in my study reported being in relationships and seeking out emotionally unavailable partners, in essence repeating many of the painful, albeit familiar dynamics from childhood. Finally, an inability to set clear boundaries (Donaldson-Pressman et al, 1994) is also illustrated in my research findings. Ingrid expressed this best as she stated, *"I lose myself...and I can't, my boundaries just dissolve in relationships and to maintain a healthy sense of self in relationship has been really difficult."*

It was found (Cohen, 1998) that narcissistic parents often obstruct the development of their children's true self. This resonates with the research generated from my study. Many of my participants were unsure of who they were, as was illustrated by the emergence of a theme that centered on a negative and/or precarious sense of self.

Klein (1990) posited that oftentimes children in the narcissistic family have not properly differentiated themselves from their parents. As adults, these individuals often cannot differentiate themselves sufficiently from their inner models. These individuals often tend or feel compelled to repeat them. These models include problematic and pathological relationship experiences learned from their narcissistic parents, which get carried over into adulthood and can affect, among many things, marital choice. My results support this notion. Indeed many of the participants seemed undifferentiated and this manifested as boundary and identity issues. As is evident from the theme that emerged regarding repetition of family of origin dynamics, many of these trends did indeed seem to repeat themselves in romantic relationships.

Alice Miller (1981) notes that children from a narcissistic family often grow into adults who are dependent on affirmation from their partners. My research supports this hypothesis, as many of my participants were very dependent on their partners for affirmation, mirroring and identity. Miller's notion that the intellectual abilities often flourish, while the emotional life remains unauthentic, reminded me of Lucia. She claimed that while she was praised for being intellectual, academic and strong, she still remained painfully out of touch with her more vulnerable emotional side.

McCarthy (1990) postulated that psychologically abused youngsters often turn into adults who tend to recoil from intimacy, since intimacy has always signified being attacked. My research seems to support this notion, as is evident with the emergence of a theme around difficulties with intimacy. In fact five of the six participants felt turned off by partners who requested more closeness.

Elkind (1991) when writing about instrumental narcissism claimed that a failure on the part of the parents to respect the individuality of the child could cause long lasting damage to the child's self esteem. This child may often grow into an adult who is unable to feel fully authentic. My research seems to endorse this notion. As a youngster, Kerry was often dismissed by his parents for his interest in war and soldiers. He was only valued within a very narrow range. As an adult, Kerry has many challenges around issues of self worth.

Links to the Parentified Child Literature

In 1997, Jurkovic claimed that the inability to express negative affect in childhood may carry through the child's life, and may result in unfulfilling romantic ties. My research supports this opinion. Most, if not all of the participants reported feeling unfulfilled and unhappy in their romantic relationships. Jurkovic also posited that the feelings of disappointment that many of them experience when they fail to make their parents happy might follow them into adulthood and emerge as feelings of worthlessness. This notion is supported by this research, as many of the participants interviewed for this thesis reported difficulty feeling worthy. Jurkovic claimed that for young girls, these caretaking activities often defined who they were, and as adults these women found that rescuing others would meet a profound need which served to confirm their very existence. Many of the women in my study reported that they put the needs of their partners first, and often felt better about themselves when they were taking care of their partners or when they chose partners who needed them.

Three of the six participants reported that they had trouble trusting their partners and this supports Jurkovic's (1997) position. He claimed that many of these parentified

adults would mistrust those whom they were intimate with, remembering from childhood how parents could not be trusted to care for them. Lucia and Judy reported that they experienced difficulty in relationships asking their partners for support or help. These results support Jurkovic's position as well. He believed that parentified adults would have trouble asking for and receiving help from intimate others.

Links to Research Studies

In 1993, Hadley, Holloway and Mallinckrodt found that family dysfunction led to significant adult self-representation and interpersonal impairment, especially difficulties with trust and intimacy. They also found that subjects who scored high on the family dysfunction scale also scored low on self esteem measures. These subjects however all came from very overtly dysfunctional homes and I was curious to discover if adults from covertly dysfunctional homes would experience similar challenges. Indeed my research supports the notion that they did. All of the participants reported trouble with intimacy and trust and all of them reported problems with low self-esteem.

In 1994, Guinta and Compas found no relationship between fear of intimacy in daughters and parental alcohol abuse or psychiatric history of parents. While it is incorrect of me to assume that there is a relationship between covertly narcissistic parents and adult offspring with intimacy issues, the six participants in this study did seem to exhibit intimacy difficulties. When I asked them if they believed that their intimacy issues were due to their narcissistic upbringings directly, most of them agreed that it had, at least in part. Had these participants, like Guinta and Compas' subjects, filled out a fear of intimacy scale, similar results may have emerged. None of my participants referred to

their intimacy issues as fears, per se. The importance of qualitative research in this field is clearly essential then, so that the oversight of such nuances ceases being a prospect.

Werner and Broida (1991) found that it was dysfunction in the family of origin, not the presence of alcohol that accounted for differences in self-esteem in the children. My research reflects this notion since none of the participants came from overtly narcissistic families (alcoholic), yet they all seemed to suffer from varying degrees of low self-esteem.

Harrington and Metzler (1997) compared offspring of dysfunctional families with alcoholism and those without to see if they differed specifically in intimate relationships. The results of this study were supported by the results of my study. It was found that the presence of dysfunction rather than presence of alcohol appeared to be related to distress in intimate relationships.

Briere and Runtz (1990) found that psychological attacks and criticism by one's parents appeared to be associated with low self-evaluation. The authors then showed that abuse need not be overt to be damaging. The results of my study strongly defend this research. Similarly in 1996, Smith studied the effects of emotional and physical abuse on self-esteem, trust and intimacy. She found that emotionally abusive behavior from the family of origin was related to self-esteem, but no such relation was found with physically abusive behavior. She also found that emotionally abusive behavior was also found to impact trust and intimacy. The results of her study were also supported by the results in this study.

Finally, Jacobvitz and Bush (1996) studied whether childhood physical abuse itself or more covert patterns of enmeshment and triangulation would be more likely to be

related to self esteem, depression and anxiety for women in adulthood. The authors stated that triangulation often included an expectation that the child take on parental roles and marital discord. The authors found that women who experienced more covert forms of abuse experienced low self esteem and interpersonal difficulties characterized by feelings of isolation and mistrust of others. My results support this research. The authors (1996) also claimed that such women had anxiety related symptoms, however I did not include such questions in my interviews and therefore cannot comment as to the existence or absence of these symptoms in my participants.

Noteworthy Findings

I was pleased to discover that some new findings emerged from this research. A very important theme that emerged from this study speaks to the unrealistic expectations that ACCNF often have of themselves, their partners and their relationships. Nowhere in the preexisting literature did this topic get addressed. None of the proponents in this field addressed this salient issue and none of the published research studies tested for the presence of unrealistic expectations. I am unsure as to whether a quantitative measure even exists for this construct. For me, as an ACCNF, this is a large piece of the puzzle and I feel very strongly that this information would have been very helpful at any point on my own personal recovery journey. I feel that the absence of this vital piece of information served to delay the rate at which I progressed.

I will now attempt to explain my understandings of the significance of the findings and the meaning of the findings. What strikes me as most meaningful about this research are the challenges that ACCNF face in romantic situations. They feel out of touch with who they are, they choose unhealthy partners, they are unaware of their needs

and they take on too much of the responsibility in their romantic relationships. These patterns seemed doomed to repeat over and over again, continually getting more and more reinforced as they do, unless they heal the wounds of the past. This population, it seems, faces a grim future unless they can seek out help for these issues, or happen upon a healthy partner who can teach them what healthy love is about. I believe that the lack of self-love and self worth that this population may suffer from will be a subconscious driving force in their lives. It may manifest as unmet childhood needs trying to get met on the significant others in their lives, desperately hoping to win their parents' acceptance, to no avail.

I am also aware that most of my participants never felt good enough and felt they had to hide parts of themselves in order to be loved and accepted. This pattern then got acted out in their romantic relationships. In effect, the pattern seems destined to be perpetuated in their romantic relationships, perhaps resulting in the creation of even more members of this population. The ACCNF in this study did not seem to feel good enough "as is." Perhaps they had trouble living in their own skin.

It seems that many of my participants learned that they were to blame for their parents unhappiness, that had they been just a little bit better, they could have made their parents happy. For most of the participants, this meant that they were not good enough as is, that they were intrinsically flawed or bad, that they were failures, and that they were less important than others. These themes then tended to get recreated with partners, with the hope, I believe of proving them untrue. Unfortunately, this did not happen often enough and in fact, even more damage was often the imminent result.

On a positive note, a few of the participants were grateful for their upbringings. One claimed that it made her a better therapist, another believed that it gave her the ability to accept and hold people in their pain. Two others felt that it taught them to be sensitive to the needs of others. One claimed that it taught her to be self sufficient and reliable. Some of the other participants learned that yearnings must be channeled into careers and projects, not people, and that numbing the self gets you in the end. Some of the others had regrets that they didn't risk themselves more emotionally, that they hadn't been kinder, and that they allowed fear to get the better of them.

Significance of the Research

This research is significant for many reasons. Many of these 'low profile' individuals, that is the adult child of a covertly narcissistic family, fail to see themselves in any of the research that is out there, and may very well believe that their particular challenges with romantic relationships means there is something terribly wrong with them. Prior to the publication boom of the adult children of alcoholic research, I imagine many of these survivors took on too much responsibility for their ills. I can only imagine the relief for this population when the literature began to emerge. A medical analogy comes to mind--a patient with a variety of symptoms, who knows something is wrong, but who goes from doctor to doctor without a diagnosis. Finally, after many months or years of anguish, the patient is finally diagnosed, perhaps with some obscure illness and the answer is found. This patient, although physically ill, feels relieved to have been vindicated, has a name for what ails him or her, stops beating him/herself up for the 'psychosomatic' symptoms and may even feel a part of a bigger community. One of my own clients, having been in an emotionally abusive relationship for the majority of her

married life, found herself perusing the self help section of a book store one day. To her shock and delight, she came across a book dealing with the subject of emotionally abused women. She devoured it and finally, she knew she wasn't crazy, or imagining things or alone. A great sense of relief came with this knowledge.

When I read The Narcissistic Family, Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman (1994), I felt as if I had come home. A colleague of mine, who read the same book and came from the same type of family, reported a similar feeling of relief when she found it. This research is important. This population needs to know that there is help out there and they need help understanding in which ways their covertly abusive upbringing continues to affect them in their current lives. The only way this can be accomplished is by conducting further research on this topic.

My participants reported feeling a sense of connection with one another upon reading the results section. They felt thrilled and excited to find kindred spirits within the other participants in the study. They claimed it helped them to stop feeling alone and crazy and they began to feel a sense of pride in their own courage and will to survive and thrive despite the overwhelming odds.

I believe that this research accomplished what it set out to do. I believe that we now have a more comprehensive flavor of the experience than what preexisted in the field. The qualitative nature of the study offers richness and detail to the rather flat research that is available regarding this population. It is my hope that a new and deeper understanding of this population has now emerged.

Implications for Future Research

This research may very well lead the way for other research in this under-studied field. First, the creation of a diagnostic test for assessing whether someone has emerged from a covertly narcissistic family would be important to establish so that quantitative research in the field could be conducted. It would also be interesting to look at the relationships that adult children of covertly narcissistic families have with their children. Another interesting idea would be to explore the effect that this upbringing may have on one's career and ability to succeed. In fact any area in one's life that could be affected by one's ability to be intimate, to like oneself, to have realistic expectations and to feel secure would be important avenues for future research. A particularly important piece of research that could emerge from this field would be the exploration of the experience of growing up in the covertly narcissistic family through a case study design. Although this study explored this in part, a more thorough and descriptive study geared specifically toward the experience of growing up in the narcissistic family would be interesting. In essence, a study focusing on the childhood stories and experiences of this group would be of utmost importance for the counseling field, as many have never even heard the terminology before. This research would help to define the population and sounds to me like the most logical place to start any future research. Although I included as much information as I could about the upbringing of each participant in my results, an entire thesis could easily dedicate itself to this topic alone. Another interesting idea for future research would be to examine the platonic relationships of adult children of covertly narcissistic families. A study exploring gender differences or racial/ethnic differences within the narcissistic family system would also be fascinating.

Implications for Counselling

The emergence of this research is very important for the counselling field. Let us think back to the importance of the emergence of the literature of the adult children of alcoholic parents. As a result, counselors were better able to understand and help this population. They were more able to understand the subjective experience of this group, and to establish a connection with a survivor. The same can be assumed for this population. It is imperative for the counselling field to awaken to the presence of these individuals. I had a client just recently who was giving hints of having emerged from this type of family and I was immediately able to open a discussion with her about her needs. I introduced the notion of her needs within her family of origin and then proceeded to speak to her needs in her romantic relationships. It seemed as if this conversation helped her to come alive. She admitted that she had never once considered the notion of her needs, but now that it had been brought up, the subject felt incredibly important for her to explore. She claimed that she had never before realized that she had needs and that they weren't being met in her romantic relationship and had never been met in her family of origin. This conversation sparked many more similar conversations exploring her needs, what they were, where they had gone, and how she could get them back. It gave her the permission she was seeking to have her needs met. Indeed, it was lucky that I had already studied the population because I was able to ask the questions that I knew were salient. Luck, however should not play a role with our clients. Therapists and counselors need to have this information at their fingertips, so that other clients who have emerged from a similar family will not have to rely on luck when they are assigned a helper. Therapy is a journey taken by therapist and client, a journey that delves deep into the world as

perceived and experienced by the client (Corey, 1996). It is therapeutically important that the therapist understand as best he or she can, what that world is all about.

This research is also important for counselors to become familiar with so that they may help their clients to understand how they may feel in their romantic relationships, or perhaps to educate them about what may occur in their romantic relationships given the research findings. They may at that time choose to forewarn their clients as to the possibility of the unrealistic expectations, the precarious sense of self and the tendency to repeat the family of origin dynamics in any future romantic relationships. Therapists may even be able to be more effective at couple counselling if they are familiar with the salient issues for one or both of the partners. This way they can discuss at the onset what to expect and how to deal with it. The emergence of this research may help to expedite and ameliorate the therapeutic process for some.

The emergence of self-help groups may be another implication for counseling. An increase in self-awareness is consistent with the expected benefits of group therapy as defined by researchers and theoreticians such as Irvin Yalom (1985). However, groups can only be formed once the research gets out into the field. Prior to the emergence of the adult children of alcoholic family literature, there were no self help groups or meetings for this population to attend, no fellow survivors to connect with and no guidelines or tools to help them cope in their lives. This population could certainly benefit from the group experience, but the research must first disseminate into the field.

Limitations to the Study

One of the main difficulties with this study was its esoteric nature and the way it played out in participant selection and recruitment. It seems to me that only individuals

who were already aware of their issues would participate. For many who may have experienced this family of origin dynamic but who had not as yet come to terms with it, the desire to participate in this research would be nonexistent. This means that all of my participants had already been enlightened as to the presence of this dynamic either through therapy or any other form of personal work. This may suggest that only a certain type of participant was included or may be included in any other future research studies in this field. Unlike the research on adult children of alcoholic parents, the only criteria for participation would be having grown up in a family in which a parent drank. This seems easy enough to understand, and would tend to include more of the population than my study. I fear, though, that the prerequisite for participating in this research may require an advanced ability to assess a situation that many individuals do not possess. As a result, I fear that I am leaving out a certain population from participating in this research. I wonder if the themes would have been different had other elements of the population been included.

Another limitation to the study may emerge from the fact that all the participants were recruited by word of mouth. None of them actually saw the poster and called me. Rather, all of the participants had been individuals who had inquired about my research, and having heard the description of the narcissistic family, recognized their own upbringing and volunteered for the study. There very well may be a difference between these two groups of volunteers.

Conclusion

It is my hope that the results of this explorative study will contribute meaningful and practical additions to the insufficient body of covertly narcissistic literature. It is my

belief that this is important work, and that this topic has been neglected for too long. As an adult child of a covertly narcissistic family, I am painfully aware of my limitations and challenges and believe that much guilt and confusion could have been lessened had my population benefited from the same popularity and exposure as the adult children of alcoholics. The need to see oneself as a part of a group, to share pain and experience with others, and to feel a connection to something larger is, in of itself, therapeutic and healing. It is my hope that the addition of this research to the field will give more people the opportunity to read about this topic, and as a result to experience that sense of connection and to know that they too are not alone.

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Appendix A

Recruitment/Information Notice for the Study

A RESEARCH PROJECT EXPLORING: THE EXPERIENCE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS FOR ADULT CHILDREN OF COVERTLY NARCISSISTIC FAMILIES

The purpose of this study is to better understand how adult children of covertly narcissistic families experience their romantic relationships.

DID YOU:

- grow up in a family in which you believed the needs of your parents were the focus of the family;
- feel responsible for meeting your parents needs;
- feel guilty making any emotional demands on your parents;
- feel that you could gain attention, acceptance and approval by meeting your parents needs;
- feel that you weren't entitled to have, express, or experience feelings that were unacceptable to your parents

If you answered yes to most of the above questions, and would be willing to talk about your adult romantic experiences, then please contact Iona at 822-4919.

This master's thesis research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marla Arvay, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education at The University of British Columbia.

Participation in this study will include one audio-taped interview of approximately one and one half hours in length, and a second interview so that you may check on the progress of the report.

Participation in this study will be completely confidential.

If you would like further information about this research study, please contact Iona Monk at 822-4919 or Dr. Marla Arvay at 822-4625 at UBC's Department of Counselling Psychology.

Thank you for your interest

Appendix B

Participant Informed Consent Form

What are the experiences in romantic relationships of adult children of covertly narcissistic families?

Principal Researcher: Iona Monk
Department of Education and Counselling Psychology
Telephone: 822-4919

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Marla Arvay
Department of Education and Counselling Psychology
Telephone: 822-4625

Purpose:

This research is being conducted by Iona Monk as one of the requirements for a Master of Arts Degree in Counselling Psychology and is supervised by Dr. Marla Arvay. This study examines the experience of romantic relationships for adult children who have grown up in families in which they as children were responsible for meeting a variety of their parent's needs and in so doing were deprived of opportunities for necessary experimentation and personal growth themselves.

Study Procedures:

The researcher will meet with you individually on two occasions for a total of approximately 2-2.5 hours in order to document your experience of your romantic relationships. The first interview will be audio-taped. You will be asked a series of questions regarding your romantic experiences. You will also be able to discuss any other aspects of your relationships that you choose. The second interview will be required for you to check on the development of the report, to share any concerns you may have and to ensure that the themes that have emerged from the interviews resonate with your own experiences. The data that will be reported involves descriptions of experiences and feelings categorized by theme.

Confidentiality:

The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed by Iona Monk, but the identity of each participant will be kept confidential. No one, except myself and Dr. Arvay will have access to the tapes or transcripts, and they will be destroyed and/or erased within 5 years. While they are in my possession, the transcripts will be coded to protect identities and will be kept in a locked filing cabinet to which only I hold a key. Any personal references or identifying information will not be included in the final report. Each participant will receive a summary of the report upon completion. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If at any time, you wish to withdraw from participation in the research, you have the right to do so without prejudice of any kind. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question asked.

Contact:

If any aspect of this research or your involvement remains unclear, or if you have any questions about this study, you may contact myself or Dr. Arvay at any time. If you require any debriefing at any time you may contact myself. If you have concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Director of Research Services and Administration at UBC, Dr. Richard Spratley, at 822-8598.

I understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate, or withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this consent for my personal records.

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Orienting Statement

As you know, I am interested in learning how growing up in a family where the children spend much of their time fulfilling the needs of their parents and put their own emotional needs second may have affected their adult romantic relationships. Given your family of origin experiences, what has been your experience of romantic relationships?

Appendix D

Interview Questions

What are some of the challenges that you face/have faced in your romantic relationships?

What feelings do you experience most often in your romantic relationships?

Have there been any patterns within your relationships that you are aware of?

Have you heard similar issues from different romantic partners about the type of partner that you are? If so, which ones that you have heard most often?

What are the struggles you face in romantic relationships?

What thoughts do you have most often in romantic relationships?

Do you generally feel happy in your relationships?

What regrets do you have as you look back?

What disappointments have you experienced in your relationships?

Do you have a type of partner that you tend to choose?

What is the usual length of your relationships?

Who usually ends the relationship most often?

Describe your perfect partner.

Describe your nightmare partner.

What traits/characteristics turn you on/off about a partner?

Can you tell me some stories about your family of origin that you believe fit into the Narcissistic family description?

there

→ didn't get needs met ^{theme}
code beliefs abt self.

~~There was no real exchanging of real needs and deep needs [L: Right] and, and needs that~~ code
~~are doomed, you know, unworthy of whatever~~ self worth not myself and

I:

FOOD BY MAT:

4. May needs second theme - no. sense of self

with them [I: Yeah, exactly] and my
~~I got angry at myself, at the~~ → anger at (R)
~~ords them.~~ I mean I had fights with this - theme
 they were the kind of fights I would have, - unrealistic
 → same anger as man - expectations
~~theme - repeat he~~ - difficult to
 - w/ intimacy

theme - repeating w/ int. mac.
emphasis on healthy food dynamics

needs - not met

characters comm. needs.

-head shaking