

Language and Trauma

Representations of Narcissistic Abuse on a Survivor Podcast

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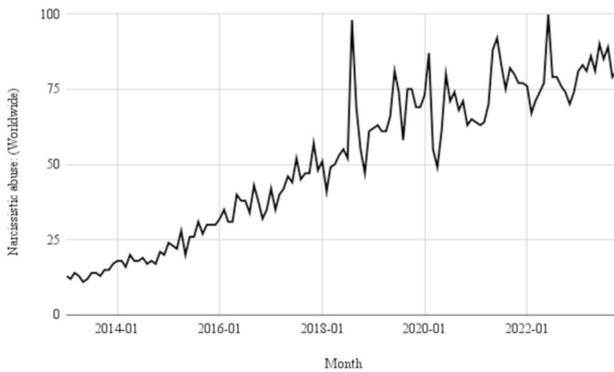
1. Introduction

Narcissistic abuse is a term used to describe the type of abuse inflicted by individuals exhibiting severe narcissistic traits, which is connected to intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, and coercive control (Howard 2022, 84). Although the exact number of those who have suffered from narcissistic abuse remains unknown, according to some estimates, it may be as high as one in five people (Brown 2010). In recent years, this phenomenon has garnered increasing public attention. Since 2016, 1 June has become the World Narcissistic Abuse Awareness Day and different sources offering help to victims of this type of abuse have mushroomed both online and in print. As shown in Figure 1, the Google search term “narcissistic abuse” has increased steadily over the past decade. For all that, this phenomenon has remained underexplored by researchers, not least because the term is not included in current psychological diagnostic classifications, such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, popularly referred to as *DSM-V* (American Psychiatric Association 2022).

Although there are overlaps between intimate partner violence (IPV) on the one hand and narcissistic abuse on the other, the two terms are not synonymous. Unlike IPV, narcissistic abuse is always inflicted by people identified as exhibiting traits of the narcissistic personality disorder.

der (NPD), which is defined in *DSM-V* as a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy. The central characteristic of people with NPD traits is that they often experience problems relating to others. In fact, literature in the field has acknowledged interpersonal dysfunction to be the core component of this disorder. Yet, few studies to date have investigated the experiences of people in relationships with these individuals (Lavner et al. 2016; Day et al. 2022).

Figure 1: Popularity of “narcissistic abuse” as a Google search term.



A value of 100 on the y-axis is the peak popularity for the term as per trends.google.com. A score of 0 means there was not enough data available.

Since narcissistic abuse may remain covert and primarily psychological, it is often unrecognized as abuse by medical professionals and even victims themselves who find it difficult to articulate their experiences (Howard 2022, 84). In other words, they do not see themselves, throughout much of their abusive relationships, as victims of abuse. It has been anecdotally reported that in attempting to make sense of the manipulative behaviors to which they had become accustomed, abuse victims come across online communities discussing experiences of nar-

cissistic abuse, many of which are strikingly like their own. Initially confused and perplexed, they learn that they too were (often subtly) controlled and manipulated by their partners. This path of online discovery is reported to be rather common, with “social media resources [acting as] ultimate breakthrough [sites] in making sense of abuse experiences” (Howard 2019, 649).

This chapter focuses on the representation of narcissistic abuse in a large collection of episodes of the *Narcissist Apocalypse* podcast (2019–). Among the studies that have investigated the consequences of intimate relationships with narcissists, most were conducted by psychologists or health care providers, and none have attended to the ways abuse is discursively constructed *via* an online ethnographic approach. Conducting research on abuse in a more controlled setting, as is usual in psychology, provides certain advantages. Studies that rely on diagnostic criteria enable researchers to focus on individuals who were objectively diagnosed either with NPD or exhibit high levels of narcissism. Stories in this chapter include protagonists who were usually not diagnosed with NPD, yet they are assumed to be highly narcissistic based on the narrators’ descriptions of their behaviors. The advantage of this type of analysis is that it offers an insight into lived experiences of abuse. These detailed accounts are promising sites that hint at the complexity of such experiences, and which may inform further research. Upon briefly considering research on narcissistic abuse, this chapter then turns to how the data for this study was collected and analyzed. The latter part of the chapter outlines the findings and ends with the discussions considering implications and further research.

2. Narcissistic abuse

The birth of the term *narcissism* is enveloped in a love story. In Greek mythology, Narcissus, a beautiful young man, was the object of affection of many, among whom the nymph Echo. Both meet a tragic end. Upon cruelly rejecting Echo, Narcissus is cursed to fall in love with the next person he sees, who, ironically, is himself. Echo disintegrates and

is reduced to a voice, not one that is her own, but an imitation of others' voices. Narcissus, paralyzed by his own beauty, transforms into another object of admiration, the narcissus flower. Echo's ego is lost to the love of another, and Narcissus's ego leads to his downfall. The story which explains the origin of the term touches on relevant aspects of what we usually understand to be narcissism. This malignant form of self-love is detrimental, if not always visibly detrimental to narcissists, then to those around them.

The term itself requires some disambiguation. In common parlance, the word *narcissist* conjures an image of someone who is overly vain and concerned with their own needs (Howard 2019, 644). In recent years, the usage of the term has broadened and can be encountered in both speech and on social media in referring to anyone who acts in a selfish, vain, or generally unwanted way (Elise 2018, 4). In the social-personality strand of psychology, narcissism is understood as a universal human trait, with every individual scoring on it from low to high (Miller and Campbell 2010, 180–1). What is usually studied in clinical contexts, however, is pathological narcissism or the narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).

Interest in NPD has increased exponentially over the years (Miller et al. 2017, 292). This is likely a by-product of the fact that narcissism in general seems to be steadily increasing across populations (Twenge et al. 2008). Few studies, however, have examined the perspectives of those involved in intimate relationships with narcissists. Their experiences should arguably be of particular interest to researchers considering that narcissism comes at great cost to not only the person with these traits, but also to larger social structures of which they are part. NPD individuals experience different problems: from the abuse of drugs to anxiety and mood disorders (Stinson et al. 2008). What is even more prominent however are their difficulties in relating to others or their impaired interpersonal functioning (Miller et al. 2007). These difficulties are so grave that having a narcissistic partner is associated with experiencing poor mental health, which may even lead to posttraumatic symptoms upon leaving the relationship (Arabi 2023). Research in therapeutic settings shows that even trained clinicians who had patients with NPD struggled maintaining their objective stance. These psychiatrists

and psychologists experienced strong negative feelings towards their patients (Betan et al. 2005).

Not only has it been established that relationships with narcissists tend to be unsatisfactory, but literature also suggests that such relationships follow clear trajectories. Namely, they have been described as initially satisfying yet highly dysfunctional as time progresses (Foster and Twenge 2010, 386). In other words, engaging in a relationship with a narcissist, be it when choosing a romantic partner, selecting political leaders, employees, or co-workers, has been likened to eating chocolate cake. Initially, such relationships appear to be superior to relationships with non-narcissists. This impression begins to fade once the selected partners, leaders, and co-workers turn out to be dishonest, controlling, and lacking in empathy (Campbell 2005), just as eating an appealing piece of chocolate cake results in sluggishness, excessive number of calories, and mood swings. Choosing morally decent people, Campbell and colleagues conclude (2011, 271), can likewise be compared to healthy eating. While it is devoid of the initial excitement, it leads to more desirable long-term outcomes.

Several studies have explored the experiences of victims of narcissistic abuse. Howard (2022) did so auto-ethnographically by reporting on her experiences as a victim of abuse and placing them within the larger mental health care context. Howard's is a heartfelt yet critical approach. What she observes is the lack of attention to victims and general misunderstanding they experience when interacting with mental health providers and with people in their social circle in general. When faced with the lack of understanding, victims of abuse may become re-traumatized and even further blame themselves for the events that had transpired. This lack of recognition can be explained on the one hand by victims struggling to find the language to express their experiences and the fact that psychological abuse is often far less tangible and thus more difficult to prove. For Howard (2019), the solution lies in raising awareness about narcissistic abuse among mental health practitioners and in society at large. This may be done by better articulating what this type of abuse entails.

Language of stories told about narcissistic abuse plays a pivotal role in better understanding such experiences. Since victims of abuse often find similar patterns when exchanging stories, they resort to naming these patterns, which leads to forming an insider language that includes words such as *future faking*, *gaslighting*, *love bombing*, *mirroring*, and *trauma bonding*. These terms for communicating shared experiences are immediately relatable to the victims of abuse and yet largely unknown outside of this community. Howard thus writes (2022, 25):

These terms appear to be absent from mainstream discussions of abuse, enabling a further obstacle to wider societal recognition, comprehension, and compassion for survivors, and facilitates social injustice by discrediting victims' voices.

In this chapter I attempt to begin removing this obstacle. I seek to shed light on this complex phenomenon and define more closely the language used to describe the experiences that are often difficult to articulate in the first place. My starting point for doing so is the analysis of the insider vocabulary in a collection of stories told on a recovery podcast.

3. Method

Data collected for this analysis involves 105 stories (1,705,433 words) told on the Canadian-based *Narcissist Apocalypse* podcast between 2019 and 2023. The automatically generated transcripts of the stories were retrieved from YouTube in the form of text files. The original transcripts did not include orthography, which is introduced in the examples below to make the examples easily readable. Whereas suprasegmental features and prosody of speech may be of interest for linguistic analysis, they are not the focus of this study, which aims to disambiguate the narrators' word choice and discourse organization. The podcast host consented for the data to be used for this study. The information shared on the podcast was already pseudonymized: the names, places, occupations, and sometimes genders of the people involved were changed in the

episodes. In the analysis below, only the excerpts that do not include any identifying information are introduced. Further, I have replaced the pseudonyms used in the podcast with my own so that the original transcripts cannot be directly traced.

As many as 98 of the narrators identified as female and only 7 identified as male. This difference between genders is staggering and there are several possible explanations for it. Studies show that men tend to be generally more narcissistic than women. This finding is subject to caveats. Namely, the effect sizes are small, and women are just as likely to exhibit characteristics of vulnerable (covert) if not of grandiose (overt) narcissism (Grijalva et al. 2015). Finally, men are less likely to disclose receiving emotional and physical abuse due to abuse stigma which affects all victims but particularly men (Eckstein 2009, 93). In other words, although the number of male victims may be closer to that of female victims, due to the existing gender stereotypes and social barriers, men are less likely to speak out about such abuse. Finally, most of the stories on the podcast are about romantic (mostly heterosexual) relationships, although some are also recollections of abuse by one or both parents, siblings, or friends.

Considering the size of the dataset, a corpus-assisted approach to discourse analysis was chosen as most appropriate (Partington et al. 2013). The aim of this approach is to uncover in the analyzed discourse “non-obvious meaning, that is, meaning which may not be readily available to naked-eye perusal” (Partington et al. 2013, 11). This is done by combining both statistical generalizations deduced from findings from corpora on the one hand and close and in-depth reading associated with the more traditional approaches to discourse analysis on the other. By employing this approach, I seek to tackle the language used to describe the suffered trauma and abuse by the narrators and detect patterns that they share. The analysis involved carrying out searches for in-group vocabulary used by the community to refer to different abuse or manipulation tactics. The vocabulary search was carried out by using different functions in #LancsBox, a software environment for corpus-based analysis (Brezina and Platt 2023). The visualizations originally

produced in GraphColl, a tool for visually representing connections between words embedded in #LancsBox, were later modified in Python.

4. Analysis of the insider vocabulary

The choice of the vocabulary for this analysis was based on existing literature (Howard 2019, 2022) and initial qualitative analysis during which I listened to each of the episodes. I thus decided to focus on a subset of shared terms presented in the following sections. I began the analysis by zeroing in on the vocabulary describing manipulative strategies employed in narcissistic abuse, starting with the most common initial strategy used by narcissists, love bombing.

4.1. Love bombing

Love bombing is a term that has been used not only by victims of abuse but also in psychology. There it is defined as a display of excessive attention and flattery during the initial stages of a relationship (Arabi 2023, 1). What this implies is that narcissists are constantly in touch with their prospective partner by calling them, sending texts, emails, contacting them *via* social media, paying them compliments, and attempting to leave a positive impression. This behavior is so commonly observed in relationships with narcissists that it has been referred to as “a narcissistic approach to relationship formation” (Strutzenberg et al. 2017). To explore how commonly the narrators refer to love bombing in the podcast corpus, I searched for the term *love bomb**. The asterisk (*) is a regular expression used in programs for text analysis and it replaces any symbol, which means that this search produced results that included the word forms: *love bomb*, *love bombed*, *love bombing*, and *love bombs*. Out of the 105 stories included in the corpus as many as 72 included direct references to love bombing. Out of the remaining stories that do not mention *love bombing*, 15 were stories of narcissistic family members rather than romantic partners, and 9 described love bombing behaviors without using the term.

This initial result, and the fact that *love bombing* is mentioned in most stories involving romantic partners (81/90), confirms what literature has described earlier: love bombing is highly common in relationships with narcissistic individuals, who may use this strategy as a way of seeking self-assurance. The fact that love bombing is often used to gain relationship security may explain why it is commonly not found in stories about narcissistic family members, who are almost always parents. Family ties are arguably pre-established, and there is less need for using overt love bombing strategies to the extent that potential romantic partners do to become an important if not the central part of the victims' lives.

Whereas earlier studies looked at excessive communication and verbal praise as typical forms of love bombing (Strutzenberg et al. 2017), in the stories analyzed here, narrators also describe receiving valuable gifts from their narcissistic partners (1). Moreover, not only is love bombing a strategy used on the romantic partners themselves but also on the prospective partners' friends and family members. This is arguably done to have the attention and praise that the narcissists show during love bombing reciprocated and to gain the admiration that they crave from both their partner and those around them (2).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (1) Anna: We got back [from vacation] and again I think we were still in pretty much, like, you know, we were still in the **love bombing stage** (...) He noticed that, you know, I had an old TV, and so, all of a sudden, a new TV showed up at my house and he bought me a new TV.
- (2) Host: So this is three months in. For everyone listening who is going through it right now: you know this is a classic **love bombing**. Like, over the top **love bombing** where he's, you know, even not just reeling you in but reeling **your kids** in to really like him.

In describing their experiences of abuse, the narrators in hindsight see love bombing as a manipulative strategy, although they acknowledge that they felt completely immersed in the excitement of the experience at the time when it took place. The podcast host often likens this sensation to developing addictive behaviors (3) or being in a state of a trance (4).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (3) Laura: I guess we were kind of like dating officially and he's just switched. He seemed like the nicest guy ever. All my friends loved him. He was very generous, he spoiled me big time.
- Host: So was the **love bombing** so extreme? At that point **you were hooked**. And was it like a continuous **love bombing** at this point?

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (4) Iris: I was still in that **love bombing stage** and I kind of overlooked it. And, so, um, when I eventually meet his mum, well.
- Host: You didn't overlook it. You, you were in a **trance**.
- Iris: Yeah, I was in a **trance**, yeah.

The term *love bombing* is used among those experiencing it as specialized terminology. Like labels used in professional registers, *love bombing* becomes a shortcut to describe the habitual or repetitive actions of the narcissist. The term is shared among most narrators, although in several instances where love bombing is mentioned (25/91), it is introduced by

the host who refers to it to summarize certain parts of the story. The role of the host as the central figure in the community should not be underestimated. Although the narrators speak freely about their experiences, they are nevertheless nudged to tell them in a specific way and order, and, insider vocabulary, although shared by most, is often used as a linguistic frame introduced by the host.

Interestingly, one narrator, Kelly (5) passes a metalinguistic comment, referring to her own stance towards insider terminology. When describing her experience of love bombing, she notes that she “hates” using this terminology (5).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (5) Kelly: And then he... it just kind of escalated. He started texting me, started, you know, **I hate to use this terminology**, but, like, literally like **love bombing** me. Like, you know, “Oh you look so, you, you look beautiful today. Um, I would like to hang out with you again.”

Kelly’s stance echoes some critical views of the everyday usage of terminology associated with narcissism noted elsewhere. Green and Charles (2019) who carried out a qualitative analysis of accounts told by victims of narcissistic partners conclude that the accounts studied often included “language and labels ... [of] literature and pop-psychology books” (p. 8) replicated in narcissistic abuse support groups. Membership in such groups, the two authors conclude, influences and skews the way in which the stories are told and structured. The two authors are critical because they are interested in studying authentic reports of abuse that have not been “filtered through” support groups. For the purposes of discourse analysis, I argue, it is precisely this joint perspective formation through common language that may be informative of support groups themselves, especially as they are, according to reports of victims themselves, staples of recovery (6).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (6) Nancy: I've been listening to this podcast for probably over a year. So, I never thought I would be in this you know situation. Or I guess I never thought I would have the courage to go on. But, you know, recently something just came over me, and I was like: "Hey, why don't I go on? Why don't I tell my story?" **I know so many people out there have helped me So I'm hoping I can help some people as well.**

4.3. Collocates of *love bombing*

Looking at the direct contexts in which a search term (here, *love bombing*) occurs is the logical first step in the analysis. Exploring occurrences of a search term together with co-text (so-called *concordancing*; Gillings and Mautner 2023) is often seen as "a way into the data." Upon conducting this preliminary analysis, the following step is usually investigating the recurring lexical patterns surrounding the respective search term. The technical term within corpus linguistics for exploring such patterns is collocation. Collocations have been broadly described as the "company that words keep" (Firth 1957, 6). To rephrase, in natural language, words do not appear randomly, but they are often found in specific contexts. Each word has the tendency to occur with other specific words (Evert 2009, 1214). Next to a qualitative, in-depth reading of a text, exploring statistically relevant co-occurrences of words, or collocations of a given word, provides an additional layer of insight into the meanings conveyed in texts.

To statistically analyze the words co-occurring with *love bombing*, I carried out collocational analysis. I have chosen to look at the words that appeared 5 words to the left or to the right of the key term, which is standard in corpus linguistics. I have opted for the cubed version of the mutual information statistic (MI₃) (Brezina et al. 2015, 159–160), which measures how often in a corpus words occur next to each other relative

to their occurrence independent of each other. In this study, a link between two words is established where the MI3 score exceeds 9.0, which is the automatic setting in #LancsBox. Considering the modest size of this corpus, the minimal frequency of the two words co-occurring was set to three. Moreover, the raw list of collocates was categorized into nine semantic or thematic categories. The following emerged (Table 1).

Table 1: *Collocates of the search term love bombing in the podcast corpus*

Semantic or thematic category	Words (raw frequency, MI3 score)
Categorization	<i>type (of)</i> (3, 9.7)
Entirety	<i>all</i> (11, 11.1), <i>everything</i> (5, 9.5), <i>total</i> (3, 12.4), <i>whole</i> (4, 9.3)
(Initial) period of development	<i>building</i> (4, 12.8), <i>first</i> (5, 9.7), <i>initial</i> (3, 13.2), <i>stage</i> (11, 17.3), <i>started</i> (9, 11.9)
Intensity	<i>extreme</i> (3, 11.7), <i>(a) lot (of)</i> (5, 9.8), <i>really</i> (8, 9.7), <i>wonderful</i> (3, 10.7)
Narcissistic abuse	<i>devaluation</i> (3, 11.7), <i>future (faking)</i> (3, 10.4), <i>gaslighting</i> (4, 13.0), <i>mirroring</i> (3, 12.6)
Pronouns	<i>you</i> (47, 14.7), <i>he</i> (36, 14.5), <i>I</i> (36, 12.7), <i>me</i> (22, 12.7)
Relational states	<i>trust</i> (4, 11.0)

There are several patterns emerging from the lexical relationships depicted here worth commenting upon. The use of pronouns reveals who typically engages in love bombing (*he* or the suspected narcissist) and who is on its receiving end (*me* or the victim of narcissistic abuse) (7, 8). This pattern arguably paints a picture of the narrator as a passive participant in the events that transpired, and the narcissist as the agent.

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (7) Anna: **He** was really good at, um, *love bombing me*.
- (8) Nicky: I think that was **him** *love bombing me* because **he** took me to the mall. We did a lot of shopping, bought a lot of expensive things.

Love bombing occurs habitually at the beginning of relationships. This observation is so common among the narrators that the term *love bombing stage* becomes an established syntagm occurring in as many as ten narratives, one of them below (9).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (9) Haley: He, you know, instantly began what they call the **love bombing stage**. So he just wanted to hold hands. He wanted to, you know, put his arm around me. He kept telling me how beautiful I was.

Interestingly, although in hindsight love bombing behaviors are seen as *intense* and *extreme* in contrast to displays of affections one might experience in relationships with non-narcissistic individuals, some narrators acknowledged that at the time when they took place, they enjoyed the attention they received, and described it as *wonderful*, even regretting not experiencing them after the relationships had progressed (10).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (10) Katy: I mean, *love bombing* was **wonderful**. He always, uh. You always wish that part stays, but of course it never does.

Studies have shown that love bombing may directly increase one's positive self-concept, especially among people with lower levels of self-esteem (Strutzenberg et al. 2017), which makes it an effective strategy in establishing romantic relationships. In the narratives on this podcast, love bombing is described explicitly as a strategy for trust building in relationships. In summarizing parts of the narratives, the podcast host introduces a clear connection between *love bombing* and *trust building* (11, 12)

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (11) Host: So what other things happened in the **trust building** and the *love bombing* stage to eventually get you hooked on him?
- (12) Host: This guy, you know, he did all this *love bombing* and this **trust building**. Is there a specific event where you're like "Yeah, stamp of approval."

Love bombing is not the only strategy used; Others mentioned include *mirroring* and *future faking*. Mirroring is an established term in psychology describing the natural phenomenon of nonconscious mimicking of other's behavior (Chartrand and Bargh 1999). In the context described here, it rather refers to a manipulation tactic used to create a false sense of connection with another person by imitating their thoughts, feelings, interests, or behaviors (Drescher 2023) (13).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (13) Lynn: This is everything like it went in the beginning with the *love bombing* and the **mirroring**. Because everything I was into he was into. Everything I was interested in, he was interested in.

Future faking refers to a person promising something about a possible joint future (marriage, buying a home, going on vacation) in order to obtain something they desire in the present (14).

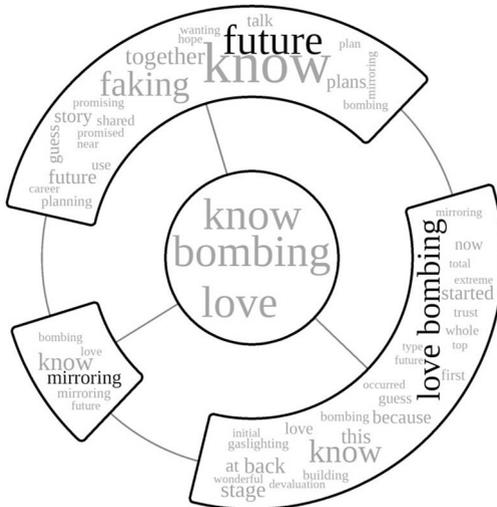
Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (14) Paris: While we were on that trip he asked me if I would consider marrying him ... and it was, uh, it was all done on **future faking**. It was completely this fantasy that I had.

These three manipulative strategies are so commonly mentioned together in the narratives, that they form a collocational network shown in Figure 2. This visualization is based on a graph generated by the GraphColl tool, which is embedded in #LancsBox. The image is modified from the one originally produced by Graphcoll in Python so that it is legible to the reader. The Python script was written by Herbert Kruitbosch, and it is available on the GitHub repository that belongs to the University of Groningen's Data Science Team (<https://github.com/UG-Team-Data-Science/word-cloud-graph>). The three word clouds in the outer parts of the image show the collocates of the key terms (“love bombing,” “future,” and “mirroring”). What the graph in its entirety illustrates is that the three terms are interconnected. The added value in the collocational network approach is that we can examine terms that are related in the narratives of abuse, which may not have been considered earlier. Thus,

to conclude, next to *love bombing*, which takes the form of compliments, attention, and gifts, other mentioned early manipulation strategies in relationships with narcissists may include *future faking* (or promising future rewards) and *mirroring* (intentionally imitating the prospective partner). Once the relationship is established, and the suspected narcissist receives the “stamp of approval” (see 12), the relationship dynamics change and become unstable, a “constant up and down” (15).

Figure 2: Collocation network: “love bombing.” “future,” “mirroring”



(CPN: MI3(9), L5–R5, C3–NC3;¹ function words removed)

- 1 CPN: “collocation parameter notation” (Brezina, 2018); MI3(9): statistic used: cubed mutual information with the cut-off value of 9; L5–R5: the position of the collocate respective of the search word – in the 5-to-the-left and 5-to-the-right window; C3–NC3 minimum collocate frequency of 3 (C3), minimum collocation frequency of 3 (NC3).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (15) Petra: At first, it was all love bombing, right? And then as the relationship progressed it was this **yo-yo** of like very much the love bombing and then going back backwards. And then it was a **yo-yo situation, a constant up and down.**

Two stages of relationships with suspected narcissists are described in contrast. The first stage includes trust building and self-esteem boosting periods of *love bombing*, *future faking*, and *mirroring* (Figure 2). The second stage includes *gaslighting* and *devaluing* (Table 1) among other types of abusive behaviors.

Gaslighting, a term that has become so popular in everyday parlance that it has been elected as word of the year in 2022 (Merriam-Webster 2022), is understood as a form of psychological manipulation that causes the victims to question the validity of their own views of the world. Psychologists describe gaslighting as a form of psychological violence where one partner displays controlling behaviors towards the other (Miano et al. 2021). In the podcast corpus, lived experiences of gaslighting are described as follows:

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (16) Mary: He said that I cheated on him with this guy in my gym and I'm like "What are you talking about, like, I've never done any of these things." So I talked about it with my counselor and he's like "Oh, he's **gaslighting** you. He's completely lying to you about your own memories and trying to convince you of them."

- (17) Evan: I was getting super sick ... and like I can't think straight. She was definitely taking advantage of that and just **gaslighting** me like crazy during that time. Like really making sure that I believed that or trying to make me believe that I was the person to blame, and that I was abusive to her.

Next to gaslighting, the narrators also mention more generally experiencing *devaluation* in the second stage of the relationship (18). Devaluation, or experiencing criticism, degradation, and other distancing behaviors, usually ends in the suspected narcissist discarding the relationship altogether, usually after finding a new partner.

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (18) Adele: I'm not high-maintenance and he made so many comments about that. "Can you put some makeup on? Can you curl your hair? Can't you wear a pair of heels? I feel like I'm walking around with a slob." You know, he just constantly **devalued** my appearance, my weight, my, um, goals, my desires, my dreams.

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (19) Kay: The **discard** was so mean. It was almost like he threw me out like I was trash. And he didn't even look back. I did hire a PI and it did get mean because I was like "I know he's cheating on me." He wouldn't, just, here's the deal: He can't be alone.

Interestingly, however, although the period of idealization and love bombing usually occurs in the first part of the relationship and

devaluation in the second, the two periods are not always consecutive. Idealization and devaluation may be inflicted interchangeably. Even in the final stages of the relationship, the narrators describe experiencing love bombing, which is sporadically used to continue the relationship. Narcissists thus seem to resort to the “carrot-and-stick” approach, using both positive and negative reinforcement in these exploitative relationship patterns (20).

Excerpt from transcripts of the Canadian-based Narcissist Apocalypse

- (20) Anna: In between the **devaluation**, there was always the **love bombing**. Something would happen and afterwards it would be like, boom: “You’re the best, you’re perfect for me, you’re the woman of my life”

5. Conclusion

Connecting narratives of lived experiences with research on abuse should help further identify the patterns occurring in abusive relationships. My findings indicate that there are striking similarities in stories of abuse: 90 per cent of people who told their stories on the podcast describe experiencing love bombing in romantic relationships with narcissists. As stated in earlier literature, excessive compliments, attention, admiration, and gifts should be seen as a potentially maladaptive strategies when forming relationships. Imitating another’s behavior, feigning common interests, and making promises about a joint future, are also described on podcast episodes as rather common. Whereas it has been established that relationships with narcissists tend to turn sour, narrators suggest that the downward trajectory is not always linear. Some positive reinforcement was present even once the relationships worsened. Keeping the victims “hooked” in this way enabled the narcissists to continue the abuse. Although the insider terminology and support groups are sometimes viewed skeptically and seen as skewing

“authentic” personal experiences in favor of shared storytelling, listeners and guests of the *Narcissist Apocalypse* podcast report experiencing relief and joy in being able to share their stories. Considering that the number of men and women in this support group is highly disproportionate, further research is needed to account for such differences and to explore whether there are gendered differences in the language employed to describe abuse. Finally, there is some evidence here to suggest that narcissistic parents use different strategies to those of narcissistic romantic partners. Further research should focus on the stories of those who were victims of narcissistic abuse as children.

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