

MOVEMENT NARCISSISM: A WARNING AND A GUIDE

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Carol Zou is an artist, writer, educator, and cultural organizer who has worked for over a decade on the relationship between arts, culture, community, and activism. She believes that we are most free when we help others get free.

Examples of this can be seen in manifestations of anti-semitism, racism, sexism and homophobia.

Why do bystanders participate in collective betrayal? According to Dr. Freyd betrayal blindness is a survival mechanism that arises “when awareness would threaten necessary relationships.”

In other words, bystanders yield to betrayal blindness in the interest of looking out for themselves and to avoid the loss or pain they might risk if they sympathized with the target.

They assign more value to their relationship with the abuser so it follows that it’s in their best interest to empathize with the narcissist not with the survivor.

In fact, in many cases bystanders may stand to gain more social capital if they lend their support to the narcissist. So it is usually a combination of greed for gain and an instinct for self-preservation that eclipses any ethical or moral considerations in the bystander.

In other words, members clique adapt to conflict within the group by “turning a blind eye,” to the harmful behaviors of the narcissist.

The longterm effects of DARVO on survivors. Many survivors feel psychologically obliterated by the trauma of experiencing DARVO. It can have disastrous consequences for the survivor’s mental health. For example, it can cause severe anxiety, panic, depression, and post-traumatic stress which, in turn, can adversely impact the survivor’s physical wellbeing.

DARVO invalidates the survivor’s lived experience. It inflicts further pain and suffering as the wronged party is cheated out of any measure of justice. Instead, in addition to the original violation, survivors are persecuted and blamed in spite of the fact that they are the wronged party.

Rejection from their peers and the narcissist’s immunity to being held accountable is a constant cascade of salt poured in the survivor’s wounds, causing them to be repeatedly re-traumatized.

More about DARVO. Learn more about DARVO with Dr. Freyd in their lecture ‘Institutional and Interpersonal Betrayal.’

Bibliography. Freyd, Jennifer J. “II. Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory.” *Feminism & Psychology* 7, No. 1 (February 1997): 22–32.

Narcissistic abuse is most often discussed in interpersonal relationships, especially when it comes to romantic relationships. However, I would venture that narcissistic abuse is not just contained to romantic relationships, but that narcissists find their platonic targets in social and group environments. Within progressive social movements, this is unfortunately true. Our current activist narratives about charismatic leadership and heroism attract individuals who see social movements as another way of satisfying their need for attention and power.

Many excellent people I know, myself included, have left progressive movement spaces because of our experiences with narcissism, because we felt unprotected from the constant gaslighting and scapegoating from people who weaponized the adoration of a social movement and institutional funding for their own self promotion. Let’s be clear: this is an incredible loss. This is a loss of kind, thoughtful, giving people from the structures that we have created to agitate for a better world, and no doubt a future loss of additional kind, thoughtful, giving people who find themselves in the narcissist’s sights. Survivors of narcissistic abuse, this is for you: at the very least, I see you.

This essay was created in dialogue with survivors of what I call movement narcissism. It focuses not on seamy stories of narcissists (sorry, gossip lovers), but rather on the lessons that we can extrapolate from a range of organizing experiences from across different cities and different social issues. While not a psychotherapist, I am a survivor of narcissistic abuse in interpersonal relationships and in movement organizing, and a diligent student of trauma as it relates to organizing for change. Conventional psychology often focuses on narcissistic abuse within relationships, and I want to think about how we can map these signs of narcissism in interpersonal relationships onto the group dynamics that we encounter in movement organizing.* I define movement narcissism as the

impulse for self-aggrandizement attached to organizing for social transformation, movement narcissistic abuse as the destructive tactics that serve this desire, and movement narcissists as those individuals who exhibit both the impulse for self-aggrandizement and who engage in destruction. Lastly, I offer some ways to think through addressing narcissism in our social movements.

A transformative justice stance doesn't mean that we gloss over the existence of violence in the world, but rather, that we seek to understand the root causes of violence and develop non-carceral tools for our communities to address those root causes. This is also not about disposability. What is the point of creating a new world, if the structures that we have set up for agitation further harm and expel people? Here's to creating a world in which we all feel safe to participate as our fullest, best selves.

Diagnosing the Movement Narcissist

Love Bombing. How do narcissists even gain a foothold in our communities in the first place? The narcissist love bombs. In romantic relationships, the narcissist showers their partner with adoration for the honeymoon period, lulling their partner into a state of vulnerability and attachment before the narcissistic abuse begins. Narcissists will repeat this cycle of love bombing over and over again, putting on their best behavior and luring their target back in when the target is on the verge of walking away. In social movements, this looks like narcissists presenting an incredibly socially conscious facade. They will say all the right things about hating capitalism and colonialism. If they are a cis heterosexual man, they will most likely proclaim themselves a feminist.

The key to narcissistic abuse is that narcissists will learn how to create a facade to endear themselves to a public audience, which makes their abuse of their chosen target even more unbelievable. Narcissists are skilled imitators and will imitate the behaviors that give them social currency. For social movement narcissists, this means parroting the language of social justice movements, which is not difficult since the words "decolonization" and "abolition" seem to be in vogue these days. But look closer behind the veneer of social justice language. Does the movement narcissist commit themselves to diligent study of these terms, or does their use of the term suggest that they have merely seen it a few times on social media? Does the movement narcissist preach feminism, but then turn around and indiscriminately pursue young, attractive women in their organization? Does the movement narcissist actually practice these politics or do they merely use them as an identity? Preaching socially progressive values is one thing, putting them into practice is another. Narcissists know how to preach, but not how to practice.

I am also going to say something wildly unpopular, which is that narcissist abuse does not correspond neatly to power relationships in society. Being a

- Survivors who confront their abuser.
- Whistleblowers.
- Socially vulnerable individuals or groups, e.g. women are more likely to be targeted for DARVO than men.

What is the purpose of DARVO? The DARVO tactic serves many purposes.

- DARVO is a smokescreen used by narcissists, psychopaths or other manipulators to conceal the truth of their behavior.
- DARVO enables the narcissist, psychopath or other manipulator to control how others perceive the target and the conflict.
- DARVO often stuns the targeted person into confusion and silence.
- Thus, the abuser is able to craft a scapegoat story which is used to cultivate biases against the target and rally bystanders to their cause.

"This occurs, for instance, when an actually guilty perpetrator assumes the role of 'falsely accused' and attacks the accuser's credibility and blames the accuser of being the perpetrator of a false accusation," explains Dr. Freyd.

In a DARVO climate, no amount of evidence will suffice as proof of the abuser's transgressions. The target will not be believed within a social circle that has been groomed by a narcissist, psychopath or other manipulator. On the contrary, the target will be subjected to a terrifying campaign of victim-blaming by the group.

Once the abuser has successfully secured the bystanders' support and conditioned them to perceive the survivor as the perpetrator, the clique collectively subjects the survivor to the merciless process of scapegoating.

If the survivor lives through it, they are usually driven into isolation and social death. Other outcomes can include homicide or death by self-annihilation. The narcissist, psychopath or manipulator's endgame is the complete destruction of the target.

DARVO as a collective grooming tactic. The cognitive distortions created by DARVO cultivate an ecosystem of moral corruption. Members of the peer group are encouraged by the narcissist to engage in polarized or black and white thinking.

The group's empathy for the narcissist is weaponized and used to encourage negative biases about the recipient of the abuse. Narcissists, psychopaths and other manipulators do this in order to ensure that members of the dominant clique become indifferent and callous about the betrayal of the survivor.

The desensitization of the group opens the door to the objectification of the targeted individual and once this is accomplished every kind of violence becomes acceptable.

The more malignant a narcissist is, the less of a conscience they have. This makes them able to blame the survivor with such ease and skill that, once the narcissist has spun their web of deception, the survivor appears to be the aggressor and the narcissist their hapless victim.

In many cases, survivors are left reeling as their abuser blithely revises the fact of their aggression, twisting the truth into a narrative that bears no semblance to what actually transpired.

This is because narcissists have mastered a tactical maneuver that effectively grooms individuals and, indeed, entire social groups by controlling their perception of events.

The name of this strategy is DARVO.

What is DARVO? DARVO is an acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse, Victim and Offender. It is a defense mechanism used by manipulators to evade accountability for the abuse they inflict on others.

The term was first presented in a 1997 article by Jennifer J. Freyd, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at the University of Oregon and founder of the Center for Institutional Courage.

According to Dr. Freyd, “The perpetrator or offender may Deny the behavior, Attack the individual doing the confronting, and Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender such that the perpetrator assumes the victim role and turns the true victim – or the whistleblower – into an alleged offender.”

Denial is used by the abuser and bystanders in their clique. It usually sounds like:

- I didn’t do anything, but if I did, it wasn’t that bad.
- It never happened, but if it did, it wasn’t that bad.

At the local level, this strategy is common among perpetrators of sexual offenses, psycho-emotional abuse, and domestic abuse. DARVO is a regular feature of coercive and controlling behavior.

At the structural level, Dr. Freyd refers to this tactic as institutional DARVO.

Who gets targeted for DARVO? For DARVO to occur a power imbalance must exist. It is most effective when the abuser has more social capital than the survivor.

If the abuser is a member of a dominant group and the survivor is a member of a disenfranchised group, generally the survivor is less likely to be believed.

People who are likely candidates for DARVO are:

narcissist, unfortunately, is perhaps one of the few equal opportunity roles in our society. Hooray! There are some narcissists who weaponize their identity in order to silence their critics. This is not an indictment of identity politics, as it does matter to center those of us who disproportionately experience violence based on our subject positions in society. Rather, it is a call to examine the content of criticism when accusations are raised against a narcissist. Does the critique emerge from violent attitudes and stereotypes? How does a power imbalance influence the content of the critique and the accountability process? Can the critique be corroborated from others occupying multiple subject positions? Does the critique of interpersonal relating refer to concrete experiences, with representational politics invoked as the only defense? Can we hold empathy for the subject positioning of the abuser, while not forgoing accountability for abusive acts?

Self Promotion. Movement organizing does not entirely consist of sexy, photo-genic direct action in the streets, or highly visible Twitter commentary. In fact, the bulk of movement organizing is incredibly mundane, involving activities like setting up chairs for community meetings, taking notes, phonebanking, and managing multiple spreadsheets. Pay attention to who shows up for which tasks. Narcissists are inevitably disinterested with tasks that don’t place them in the public eye and build their following. They are almost always the ones on the microphone talking to reporters when they haven’t done the work of calling people to make sure there is turnout for a march. Narcissists will devalue and ignore the behind the scenes labor and the people who perform this labor. The great irony is that narcissists are attracted to movement spaces, and also welcomed into movement spaces, because these spaces consist of highly empathetic and selfless individuals which the movement narcissist then targets and devalues.

Factionalism, Isolation, and Gaslighting

A relationship narcissist isolates their target, slowly cutting their target off from sources of social support that can offer a critical and balanced perspective on the narcissist’s emotional abuse. Additionally, a relationship narcissist triangulates by positioning their target in competition with another person who is the example of an ideal their target can never live up to—a former relationship, or a favored child. This triangulation is used to attack the target’s self esteem and to manipulate the target into behaving a certain way by comparing them to the mythical ideal.

In social movements, I’ve seen this isolation and triangulation happen in terms of narcissists creating factions of acolytes that they can then use to isolate and attack their target. As expert love bombers, narcissists will create

a facade that endears themselves to these acolytes, who don't see the abuse that the narcissist perpetuates, and then use this faction as proof that they are in the right when outnumbering their target.

I have also witnessed narcissists use this triangulation tactic, not necessarily with another person, but with the holy grail of social justice: theoretical purity. Good lord, to be triangulated against Karl Marx as the other woman! Narcissists will attack their target by using a black-and-white approach to social justice values, asserting that if you do not completely agree with their theoretical proclamations, that you must be against them and therefore against the side of justice. Narcissists do not use "Are you down with us?" as a phrase to invite others into the project of collective liberation, but rather as a phrase that tells them whose thoughts they can control and who they can expel. This is the equivalent of movement gaslighting, of telling people that their good faith efforts do not measure up to a standard of theoretical purity. The ultimate gaslighting occurs, of course, when a narcissist questions your dedication to the cause as a reason to push your boundaries and manipulate you into doing things beyond the scope of your consent. The "cause" is used as a triangulation tactic to accuse you of never living up to the cause, and to coerce you into self-sacrifice.

Almost all movement narcissists behave in carceral ways that evade good faith communication. Passive aggressive communication, accusations, name calling, shaming, not taking accountability, spreading rumors, calling for expulsion—these are the tactics of the movement narcissist.

Wanton Destruction. One false premise of activism is that it is solely about destroying the systems that oppress us, and not also about building systems and infrastructures that sustain us. This call to destroy the system attracts individuals who have a destructive impulse, and use activist language as a cover to justify that impulse. This is also why the narcissist initially seems attractive: they are highly critical of society and will rally everyone around them to destroy oppressive systems.

Of course, oppressive systems must be destroyed. But pay close attention to whether or not the narcissist is discerning in their path of destruction. Narcissists do not differentiate between destroying oppressive systems, and destroying social relationships and livelihoods. They often do not consider the lives and circumstances of other people when they initiate showy direct actions, often for the sake of improving their own media image. For example, they will leave other people to be arrested for a direct action, without considering the social positioning of those arrested and coordinating jail support. Or they will shame people for not showing up to an action or going on strike, without coordinating strike funds to support the economic risk that they're urging others to take. Narcissists often don't occupy the position of the most

essay will prompt self reflection within a narcissist, but hopefully it can prompt understanding within those of us who surround them. Once again, this essay is not a replacement for navigating the nuances of a particular situation, which only people who are in relationship with each other can describe adequately. Trust yourself and your needs and perception of a situation.

One last hard truth about narcissistic abuse in movement spaces is that many times, we find it difficult to walk away because these spaces are worthwhile and do worthwhile work. Some of the most transformative and pivotal movement spaces that I've had the privilege to know harbor narcissists, which causes a lot of internal conflict within the constituents of these spaces. Often we don't talk about the shortcomings in our movement spaces because we don't want to undermine the legitimacy of the work or the cause. Our fears about the fragility of our institutions emerge from the punitive and reductive way society at large operates. I wish for a day where we can prioritize the health of ourselves and our movement spaces, hold both the good and the bad that a movement space has incurred, and engage in processes of evolution and reconciliation.

Ultimately, I write this because I see people enter into movement spaces that promise them a different world, only to experience a replication of the harm of an unjust system. If our movements are prefigurative of the worlds that we want to build, then I believe that we can and should model loving, rigorous accountability within our movement spaces. I hope that this framework can lead to the building and maintenance of spaces that feel loving and nourishing instead of depleting. I hope that this helps people reconcile their relationships with movement spaces and feel affirmed in their actions to seek positive social transformation, in order to build a more populous and joyful movement. Another world is possible, and we are the ones who must make it.

* The description of psychological narcissism used in this essay refers to the description in Shahida Arabi's book, *Becoming the Narcissist's Nightmare*.

How Narcissists Use DARVO to Escape Accountability

SOMETIMES IT CAN SEEM as if narcissists possess such extraordinary manipulation skills they appear to bend reality to their will.

This is made painfully clear when they inflict harm on someone and, astonishingly, escape accountability by flipping the script and blaming the person they've wronged.

Narcissists are expert at erasing the pain they cause from the narrative. They wipe their hands clean by projecting their malice, aggression and treachery on to the target.

resolve the traumas that they bear due to an oppressive system. Many people, because of their existing traumas, are easily triggered within movement spaces. If we do not create the guardrails for interpersonal relating in movement spaces, then these spaces become a place for people to act out their traumas and in turn perpetuate the cycle of violence by traumatizing others.

Conventional psychology names that narcissistic personality disorder is incorrigible, and I know that might not align with many of our views and desires regarding transformative justice and the ability for an individual to grow from their wrongdoing. Some of us will choose to see the social factors and trauma that has contributed to shaping the narcissist and causing them to harm people in a certain way. I think it is fair to not rush to an armchair diagnosis that abandons people, and at the same time I believe that a trauma informed space prioritizes the trauma of survivors, and can also hold both the need for transforming the social roots of trauma and the need for those who cause harm to be accountable.

Our movements often coalesce around causes; however, knowing the technical details of climate change or immigration policy doesn't mean that we share agreements about how to relate to each other. Our movements must place as much of a priority on defining the way we relate at the same time that we define our causes. Community agreements are a key aspect of facilitating a trauma-informed way of interpersonal relating. They define interaction that is safe and mutually respectful, and create accountability for all those who participate. Community agreements are not "rules" rooted in the fear of punishment, but guidelines that empower both individuals and the community overall. They also teach us how to care for one another in ways that the world beyond these spaces often does not.

Conclusion. Narcissism is a pathology, but there are also narcissistic tendencies in all of us. Who doesn't love posting an attractive photo on social media and receiving likes from our friends (I do, OK?). I do want to caution against conflating narcissistic tendencies with the harm that narcissists cause in collective situations. The former is forgivable; the latter less so. It is up to you to use this guide to decide if you are witnessing harmful interpersonal relating, or someone who just really, really loves taking selfies. Narcissistic abuse is also by no means the only type of abuse and exploitation existing in movement spaces (sexual abuse and labor exploitation come to mind), and this guide is not meant to be inclusive of all abuses that one might encounter in movement spaces.

Since narcissists are highly skilled at adopting facades, I have no doubt that some narcissists will read this and not only not realize their own behaviors, but will instead use this language to accuse other people in their midst of being narcissists. Such is the risk of the public domain. I do not know that this

vulnerable in an organizing group, but rather suggest actions and tactics that place the most vulnerable at risk.

Narcissism and the Nonprofit Industrial Complex. One critique of psychology is that it tends to individualize issues with complex societal causes instead of analyzing issues on a societal level. With this essay, I hope to also take a look at the ways in which our larger social structures enable narcissistic abuse. One key culprit is the nonprofit industrial complex, in which the work of social movements is appropriated by and/or transferred onto government and foundation funded nonprofits. Funding sources tend to only communicate with the Executive Director or figurehead of the organization, creating a dynamic where the Executive Director takes undue credit for the work of their employees. Additionally, the environment of false scarcity created by foundation funding means that nonprofit leaders often act in competition rather than in cooperation with one another, exacerbating the factionalism that is created by narcissistic tendencies. Detached from the realities of communities that they don't encounter on a daily basis, foundations reward who is loudest, and unfortunately, that doesn't always mean who is doing the work.

On a grassroots level, activist groups are not necessarily vying for funder dollars, but rather for public attention. Prioritizing tactics that lead to a large number of followers will naturally lead to prioritizing tactics that are highly mediagenic and place the narcissist in the spotlight. Building a large following without simultaneously following through on building supportive infrastructure can create a Fyre Fest style situation in which impacted people come to a movement group for assistance, only to find that the reality differs greatly from the image projected on social media. Inviting more people into movement spaces and building larger bases is a worthy goal, and at the same time, we should not confuse that principle with narcissistic tactics of attention-grabbing that actually prohibit us from supporting actual needs of directly impacted people.

Movement Narcissists: A Diagnostic. Narcissistic abuse is multifaceted and difficult to detect. With that in mind, here are some questions that I've developed to ask myself if a narcissist is in my midst.

- Does this person only talk about themselves or promote their own work?
- Does this person never credit other people nor promote other people's work?
- Does this person create messes that other people need to expend a lot of emotional labor and physical labor to clean up?
- Does this person seem very territorial over relationships with other group members?

- Does this person have trouble apologizing for their missteps, even the small ones?

If you answered “yes” to a majority of these questions, you might be dealing with a movement narcissist.

Solutions

Believe Survivors. Narcissistic and emotional abuse can be so subtle that it takes years for a survivor to recognize that they were not just subject to the typical conflicts and disagreements of group process, but rather to consistent targeted devaluing by the movement narcissist. Narcissists get away with their behavior because their targets are too afraid to share their stories; similar to what the #MeToo movement shows us, once one survivor shares their story, other stories emerge. Additionally, the #MeToo movement against sexual assault can guide us in thinking about community support of survivors looks like.

First, it means that the survivor’s safety is paramount. Because a narcissist’s self worth hinges on the maintenance of this public facade of goodwill, the narcissist is most volatile when their harmdoing has been exposed to the public. Not all survivors will want to share their stories, and the community around them must be mindful of retaliation from the abuser. While a community can hold an abuser through an accountability process, survivors have the right to set their boundaries. Some survivors may never want to engage with their abuser. It is not the obligation of the survivor to rehabilitate the person that harmed them. Rather, it is the obligation of the rest of us in the community to create a culture that supports survivors and supports accountability for perpetrators.

Deplatforming. Many relationship manuals for narcissism propose no-contact with the narcissist. I’ve always found this to be impractical when it comes to other relationships with narcissists, such as family relationships. Likewise, in a small and tightly-knit movement community, it is highly unlikely that a narcissist will completely disappear from the community. If anything, narcissists tend to move to an adjacent movement group in which their tactics are lesser known, which is why it is all the more important to believe survivors when they have spoken out about narcissistic abuse.

While we can’t, and shouldn’t wish to invoke the tactics of carceral banishment, what we can do is make sure that we don’t enable the narcissist by giving them a platform. Narcissists depend on attention for sustenance. It’s important to focus group processes on affirming collective voice and collective decision making, and to prohibit narcissists from taking on a leadership role.

Narcissists join movements for their own self-aggrandizement, and will leave just as easily when that opportunity no longer exists.

Build a culture rooted in relationship rather than charismatic leadership.

While only the narcissist is accountable for their own actions, we are collectively responsible for the culture that we create to enable or discourage narcissists. The culture that we build around believing survivors, honoring their boundaries, and deplatforming their abusers, is a key aspect of building a culture to discourage narcissists. Additionally, we need to take a hard look at the way that we have narrated movement leadership throughout history. Often history only teaches the story of the charismatic leader, leaving out all the people who worked to sustain their leadership. This leads to popular misconceptions about movement organizing that sees activism as a series of photogenic media interventions, and not as the sustained project of relationship building and collective consciousness raising.

Narcissists are invariably attracted to the opportunity to be a charismatic leader, and the public enables narcissism masquerading as charismatic leadership because of the false narratives that we create around movement activism. Social media exacerbates this problem of charismatic leadership, with many narcissists taking advantage of the platform to craft a persona in order to attract a following. This persona often obscures the conflicts that occur when they operate in real life, on the ground with their peers.

To counter the way that narratives of charismatic leadership and social media enable narcissists, we need to practice lifting up movement organizing as a collective endeavor made of the most mundane contributions. We need to make visible and celebrate the people who provide childcare, take notes, and call phone numbers on spreadsheets as part of the way that we can contribute a small piece to our collective liberation. This is not a call to abandon all leaders, but rather to notice which ones will also clean up after the meeting, and which ones share credit with the many people in which they are in solidarity.

Additionally, we need to build movements rooted in relationship building. Many of us don’t have true relationships with the people that we admire on social media, and thus cannot adequately judge how this social media persona moves in their communities. Only when we are in relationship with someone, do we know the truth of how they treat other people, and can make decisions to hold them accountable. Social media has enabled a global dialogue between movement activists which is incredibly valuable. At the same time, we must root in the intimacy of building authentic localized relationships.

Trauma-informed movement spaces. Building movements based on relationships means that we must all work to educate ourselves on managing trauma within interpersonal relationships. Many people come to social movements to