



Photograph: Princess and The Pea, permission of Royal Danish Theatre & Henrik Stenberg photography.

## GYNOCENTRISM<sup>1</sup> AS A NARCISSISTIC PATHOLOGY

### PART 2

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#### ABSTRACT

*Part one* of this paper surveyed features of grandiose narcissism and gynocentrism and found significant correlation. *Part two* investigates vulnerable narcissism as an additional mode of enacting gynocentric behaviour and discusses how this might impact men's wellbeing and gendered relationships. This survey confirms that gynocentrism is characterised by features of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and concludes that gynocentrism poses significant burdens for relationships and male partners.

**Keywords:** gender, grandiose narcissism, gynocentrism, narcissism, vulnerable narcissism

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<sup>1</sup> Gynocentrism (n.) refers to a dominant focus on women's needs and wants relative to men's needs and wants. This can occur within the context of cultural conventions, institutional policies, and in gendered relationships. (Wright, 2014)

## BACKGROUND

[Part one](#) of this survey compared gynocentric behaviours with those of grandiose narcissism. The comparison revealed a significant overlap between gynocentrism and narcissism, indicating that gynocentrism is an expression of female narcissism in the context of heterosexual relationships and exchanges, and in women's self-evaluations (Wright, 2020).

## GRANDIOSE NARCISSISM

Grandiose narcissism is divided into two primary modes of expression: 1. *agentic narcissism*, which is associated with posturings of leadership, intelligence and competence, and 2. *communal narcissism* which is associated with posturings of exceptional empathy, helpfulness, fairness, cooperativeness, generosity and other vaunted social values (Gebauer et al., 2012). Both modes are oriented to the affirming of self-esteem and the securing of social power and special entitlements. Grandiose modes of expression also tend to be skewed by gender with more males displaying the agentic form, and females scoring higher on measures of communal narcissism (Gebauer et al., 2012).

The present study will expand its analysis beyond grandiose narcissism to include the further subtype *vulnerable narcissism* which is receiving increased interest from researchers due to its expression by women, thus providing more insights into ways gynocentrism and narcissism are intertwined. The vulnerable narcissist self-identifies with ideals of perfection, but whereas grandiose narcissists also believe they are perfect and believe that others see them that way, vulnerable narcissists believe they are perfect but realise that others are failing to see them that way (Hammond, 2016). The mismatch between the vulnerable narcissist's self-image and contrary appraisals from others leads such individuals to react with feelings of victimisation, hyper-sensitivity, negative emotion, distrust of others, increased levels of anger and hostility (Travers, 2022), relational aggression (Vize, 2019), and sometimes interpersonal violence (Green, et al., 2019; Green, et al., 2020a).

Further characteristics of the vulnerable narcissist include a need for attention and admiration, low self-esteem, introversive self-absorbedness, high neuroticism, hypersensitivity to even gentle criticism, and constant need for reassurance (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Brogaard,

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2019). Dr. Craig Malkin points out that vulnerable narcissists “are just as convinced that they’re better than others as any other narcissist, but they fear criticism so viscerally that they shy away from, and even seem panicked by, people and attention” (Malkin, p.34. 2016).

Berit Brogaard (2019) states that because of their high neuroticism and hypersensitivity to criticism, vulnerable narcissists are prone to overreact emotionally, being always on the verge of bursting open with hatred. She elaborates on the psychodynamics of this tendency:

*Vulnerable narcissism is associated with dissociation of the self-image into an explicit, positive self-image and an implicit, negative self-image. The positive self-image is associated with excessive pride, whereas the negative self-image is associated with shame and humiliation. When receiving only positive feedback, the narcissist is able to keep the negative shame-filled self-image hidden below the level of conscious awareness. But when they experience external feedback as criticism, they are forced to confront their negative self-image and feel deeply ashamed.*

*Whereas the vulnerable narcissist is struggling with internally conflicting self-images, no hidden negative self-representation is threatening to make a dent in the grandiose narcissist’s positive self-image. Negative feedback, therefore, doesn’t have as profound an impact on the grandiose narcissist. But the deep shame this brings upon the vulnerable narcissist turns her into a combustible compound destined to explode in a frightening outburst of anger or all-consuming fit of hatred. This hostile reaction to insinuations of imperfection is also known as “narcissistic rage.” (Brogaard, 2019)*

Some studies have suggested that vulnerable narcissism tends to be gender neutral (Besser & Priel, 2010; Miller et al., 2010), however a greater collection of studies confirms a higher prevalence of this type among women (Onofrei, 2009; Pincus et al., 2009; Wright, et al., 2010; Huxley & Bizumic 2017, Şar & Türk-Kurtça 2021; Green et al., 2020b, Green, 2020c; Green et al., 2022; Green et al., 2023). Grijalva et al. (2014) find that differences in gender expression along grandiose and vulnerable lines can be attributed to gender-related norms associated with masculinity and femininity respectively, with Green et al (2020b) proposing that males are more likely to endorse overt narcissistic characteristics, and women less so. Gendered preferences for expressing subtypes of narcissism have not been adequately recognised in the academic community until recently, but with the addition of communal and vulnerable forms of narcissism to the lexicon the assumption that it is a mostly male pathology is turned on its head,

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with females now occupying a sizeable portion of the diagnostic territory.

Based on the foregoing phenomenology, vulnerable narcissism can be conceptualised as a dual archetype comprised of a). an exaggerated sense of perfection and concomitant desire for pedestalisation, with b). a recurring identification with interpersonal victimhood. The dual nature of the archetype is aptly symbolised in the fairy-tale *The Princess and The Pea* (Andersen, 2013), which portrays a young woman's desire for pedestalisation combined with her extreme vulnerability to minor impingements. The plot centres around her claimed royal ancestry which is confirmed only by a test of her over-the-top sensitivity:

*One stormy night, a young woman drenched with rain seeks shelter in the prince's castle. She claims to be a princess, but no one believes her because of the way she looks. The prince's mother decides to test their unexpected guest by placing a pea in the bed she is offered for the night, covered by twenty mattresses and twenty eider-down beds on top of the mattresses. In the morning, the princess tells her hosts that she endured a sleepless night, kept awake by something hard in the bed that she is certain has bruised her. With the proof of her bruised back, the princess passes the test and the prince rejoices happily, for only a real princess would have the sensitivity to feel a pea through such a quantity of bedding. (The Princess and the Pea, 2023)*

As in vulnerable narcissism, the story captures a powerful sense of entitlement in conjunction with a vulnerability to the effects of external forces.

## **TENDENCY FOR INTERPERSONAL VICTIMHOOD**

In 2020 researchers identified a personality construct they refer to as the Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood (TIV) (Gabay, et al., 2020). The construct involves four dimensions: 1. a sense of moral elitism, 2. a lack of empathy, 3. the need for recognition (need to have one's sense of victimhood acknowledged and empathised with), and 4. rumination over interpersonal offenses which includes aggressive reactivity and a desire for vengeance. The TIV is centred in a personality type characterised by an ongoing feeling that the self is a victim, which they define as an enduring feeling of being a victim across different kinds of interpersonal relationships. Comparing the Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood with features of grandiose narcissism, and not with vulnerable narcissism, the authors drew the following conclusion:

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*We also posit that both narcissism and TIV are characterized by vulnerability to threats to the self, but that the content of these threats would be different. Narcissists present themselves to the world as strong, capable, and talented (and relatedly, differently from TIV, narcissism was found to be associated with extraversion; Stronge et al., 2016). Therefore, threats are related to anything undermining their grandiosity and superiority, such as extraordinary abilities, achievements or positive qualities. In contrast, the self-presentation of high-TIV individuals is that of a weak victim, who has been hurt and is therefore in need of protection; a considerate and conscientious person who must face a cruel and abusive world. Threats to high-TIV individuals are related to anything that can undermine their self-image of moral superiority; or elicit doubts from their environment as to whether the offense occurred, the intensity of the offense, or their exclusivity as victims. These, and additional hypotheses should be examined in future research. (Gabay, et al., 2020)*

The Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood appears to have much in common with vulnerable narcissism, although the authors of the paper do not address this obvious point—instead they compared features of TIV with grandiose narcissism alone. The authors' conclusion that narcissism and TIV are distinct constructs is therefore not entirely convincing due to the omission of the vulnerable type. The Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood and vulnerable narcissism appear to be highly overlapping constructs as both report a sense of moral elitism, a need to have one's sense of victimhood acknowledged and empathised with, and associated feelings of persecution, resentment and rumination.

In popular culture the exaggerated tendency to present oneself as victim is referred to as damseling (short for damsel in distress), which tends to occur when a woman is not receiving attention, conformity or admiration in line with her self-image. Professor Janice Fiamengo (2021) has identified the narcissistic grandstanding of damseling as a kind of “irresistible lure” for those who would employ it, while also underlining the trepidation and resentment this tendency generates in many men:

*Women's claims of victimhood take a great deal of time and energy away from many pressing issues, and create an uneven political playing field in which every man knows he can be wrong-footed, and every woman knows she can power trip if she wants to. The damsel option disinclines some women from whole-heartedly pursuing competence because they know they can deflect criticism or gain advancement by sorrowing eloquently, creating bad faith in many women, suspicion and resentment in many men. (Fiamengo, 2021)*

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Fiamengo's essay highlights the considerable social and interpersonal attention that can be garnered from a projection of victimhood. Whether the presenting damsel's distress be real, exaggerated or wholly fabricated, it represents a kind of soft power that forces the surrounding environment to stop and take notice.

As noted, narcissism may be expressed in grandiose or vulnerable ways. Empirical studies confirm that the two modalities work as "two sides of the same coin" (Şar & Türk-Kurtça, 2021) with narcissistic individuals typically oscillating, Janus faced, between these subtypes (Horowitz, 2009; Kernberg, 2009; Ronningstam, 2009; Wright, 2010; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Gore, 2016). Likewise, gynocentric behaviour displays features of both vulnerable or grandiose narcissism (Wright, 2020), and also oscillations between these two modes of expression.

## **FEMINISM AND GYNOCENTRISM**

Feminist ideology (or branches of it) are characterised as gynocentric by both feminist and non-feminist researchers (Young, 1985; Nicholson, 1997; Nathanson & Young, 2001; 2006; 2010; Kostakis, 2011; Wright, 2018). Narcissism among self-identified feminists has been studied by Imogen Tyler in her paper 'Who put the "Me" in feminism?' The sexual politics of narcissism (2005), which surveyed the connection between feminism and narcissism that has long been a subject of public discourse, and a more recent study has confirmed that feminist women have significantly higher levels of narcissism than non-feminist women, and are less tolerant of disagreement than non-feminist women (Taneja & Goyal, 2019). As detailed by Naomi Wolf, feminism also tends to bifurcate along grandiose and vulnerable lines, or what she refers to as "power" and "victim feminism" (Wolf, 2013). Wolf explains that victim feminism is when a woman seeks power through an identity of disenfranchisement and powerlessness, and adds that this amounts to a kind of "chauvinism" that is not confined to the women's movement alone, stating; *"It is what all of us do whenever we retreat into appealing for status on the basis of feminine specialness instead of human worth, and fight underhandedly rather than honourably."* (Wolf, p147. 2013). Wolf adds that the deluded rhetoric of the victim-feminist creates, *"a dualism in which good, post-patriarchal, gynocentric power is 'personal power,' to be distinguished from 'the many forms of power over others'"* (Wolf, p160. 2013). Other feminist writers have independently concurred with Wolf's categorisation of "agentic" and "victim" modes of

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performing feminism (Wolf, 2013; Denfeld, 2009; Sommers, 1995; Roiphe, 1993).

A century prior to observations made by Wolf, English philosopher E. Belfort Bax observed the same bifurcation within the feminist movement of the first wave, describing a grandiose form of activism he referred to as “political feminism” which concerned itself with claiming equal rights and privileges for women without demonstrating commensurate achievements, capabilities, responsibilities or sacrifices with men, and a vulnerable kind he called “sentimental feminism” which concerned itself with securing sympathies toward women while at the same time fostering antipathy toward men. Bax made the observation that these two forms of activism often occurred in individual feminists who would oscillate between these modes of expression depending on which one was momentarily efficacious for securing power (Bax, 1913).

#### **FOUR DIMENSIONS OF GYNOCENTRISM**

Based on observations above, the following model is proposed for the origins and ongoing maintenance of cultural gynocentrism. The model is comprised of four interlocking factors; 1. A rise of unique gendered customs occurs within aristocratic circles of France and Germany and is subsequently diffused throughout Europe and onto much of the new world, 2. Female pedestalisation is promoted as an integral feature of the gendered customs, 3. An accompanying set of cognitive biases are generated to compliment the gendered customs, and 4. the codification of these gendered principles occurred, and continues to occur, in social institutions, policies, and in law.

##### ***1. A revolution in gendered customs***

Cultural gynocentrism germinated in medieval Europe during a period of increased cross-cultural influences. During the twelfth century, French society experienced the increasing popularity of the Marian cult and its influence on women’s status, the arrival of Arabic poetry celebrating and venerating women, aristocratic courting trends emphasising women’s esteem, dignity and worth, and more importantly the imperial promotion of gynocentrism by Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie De Champagne who, via the arts, crafted the traditional notion of chivalry into one more focused on serving aristocratic ladies—a practice referred to today as courtly and romantic love. The aristocratic classes who crafted the gynocentric themes



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and customs did not exist in a vacuum; the courtly love themes they celebrated would certainly have captured the imaginations of the lower classes through public displays of pomp and pageantry, troubadours and tournaments, minstrels and playwrights, the telling of romantic stories, and of course the gossip flowing everywhere which would have exerted a powerful effect on the peasant imagination. (Wright, 2014).

The gynocentric expectations of the sexual relations contract, as encoded in courtly love fiction, made their way by degrees from the aristocratic classes down to the middle classes, and finally to the lower classes – or rather they broke class structure altogether in the sense that all Western peoples became inheritors of the sexual relations contract regardless of their social station (Wright, 2017). This evolution was hastened by the medium of stories which illustrated its principles: medieval romances of Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere; the weaving and telling of European fairy tales; Shakespeare; Victorian women’s novels; up to and including modern Disney Princess movies and the ubiquitous romance novel which continues to out-gross all other genres of literature today. Today the romantic novel remains the biggest grossing genre of literature worldwide, with its themes saturating popular culture and its gendered assumptions informing politics and legislation globally (Wright, 2017).

C.S. Lewis characterised the above development as a ‘feudalisation of love,’ because noblewomen had adopted the feudal contract between Lord and vassal and repurposed it as a model to govern sexual relations—a model that would intentionally cast noblewomen in the role of Lord (French *midons*), and her man as vassal which continues to be symbolised in the iconic display of a man going down on one knee to propose marriage. Lewis states that in comparison to the gender revolution launched by the feudalisation of love, the Renaissance amounts to a mere ripple on the surface of literature (Lewis, 2013). The resultant sexual relations contract forms the internal rationale of modern societies, including the subsequent waves of feminist ideology which embraced this idea with greater fervour, applying the gendered principles ever more aggressively with each iteration of the movement.

## ***2. Encouragement of female narcissism***

The proverbial ‘pedestalisation’ of women fostered by romantic tropes is one that



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encourages narcissistic self-identification in women (Wright, 2020). An unbroken line featuring noblewomen and the men who love them appears in each iteration of literature; from the medieval romances, through to modern Disney princesses. As a dominant source of role modelling, studies have surveyed the impact of such imagery on women's identity formation and their choices of romantic partners, finding for example that "women are influenced, whether consciously or unconsciously, by what they saw in Disney princess films while choosing mates, setting standards and establishing expectations for their lovers" (Minor, 2014). Parents may not fully appreciate the impact of exposing daughters to aristocratic role models, nor see the harms that can arise from such an identification for later adult relationships. In their book *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in The Age of Entitlement* (2009), Twenge and Campbell underline the dangers of princess role models which encourage daughters to become narcissistic:

*Parents do not consciously think, "Wow, wouldn't it be great to raise a narcissistic child?" Instead, they want to make their children happy and raise their self-esteem but often take things too far. Good intentions and parental pride have opened the door to cultural narcissism in parenting, and many parents express their love for their children in the most modern of ways: declaring their children's greatness. A remarkable percentage of clothing for baby girls has "Princess" or "Little Princess" written on it, which is wishful thinking unless you are the long-lost heir to a throne. And if your daughter is a princess, does this mean that you are the queen or king? No—it means you are the loyal subject, and you must do what the princess says. (Twenge & Campbell, 2009)*

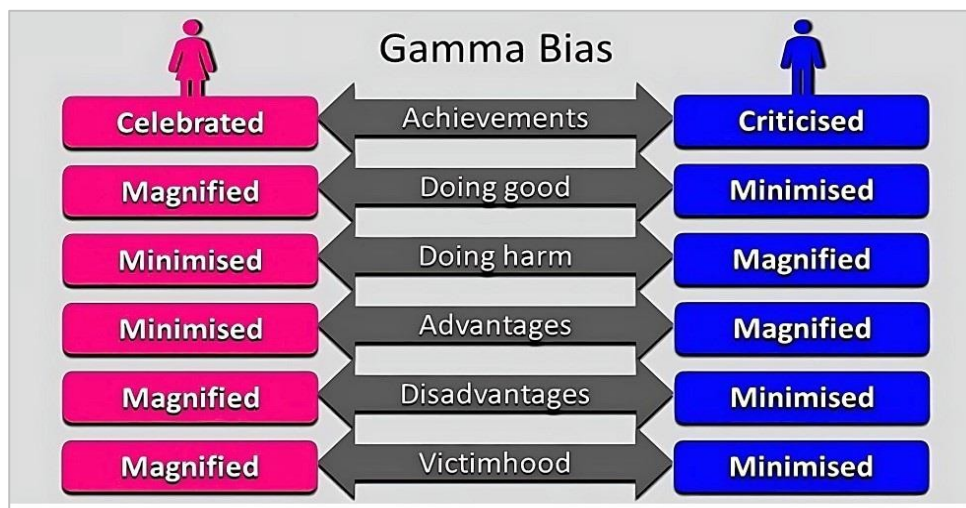
In fairy tale models the female gender role becomes the locus of a narcissistic script, as detailed by Green and colleagues (2019) who suggest an unfavourable outcome whereby, "female narcissists may assert their femininity and receive affirmation from society to attain their goals, and at the same time deflect accountability and externalise blame" (Green, et al., 2019).

### **3. Activation of gamma bias**

A key mechanism involved in the maintenance of gynocentrism is referred to as gamma bias, a cognitive gender bias theory developed by Seager & Barry (2019). Gamma bias refers to the operation of two concurrent biases: alpha bias (exaggerating or magnifying gender differences) and beta bias (ignoring or minimizing gender differences). Gamma bias occurs when one gender difference is minimized while simultaneously another is magnified, resulting in a doubling of

cognitive distortion (Seager & Barry, 2022).

According to Seager & Barry, gamma bias works by magnifying women's issues and achievements and minimizing men's issues and achievements. Alternatively, the dynamic is reversed and employed to minimize negative female traits and behaviors, while magnifying or exaggerating negative male traits or behaviors.



**Figure 1.** Examples of gamma bias

One hypothesis regarding the historical growth of gamma bias and the disfavouring of males is evolutionary pressures for males to protect and provide for women which involve a reluctance to view men as vulnerable (Seager & Barry, 2019). A more detailed sociological hypothesis presented in this paper posits the emergence of gamma bias in medieval Europe when feudal class distinctions were repurposed as a model for gender relations—the development which led C.S. Lewis to propose that European society had drifted from a social feudalism to a sexual feudalism. Gamma bias may arise from class distinctions and “class cognition” that were part of the original feudal template, which have carried forward as an unfortunate hangover in the gendered context. A notable result of this development is a gender empathy gap (Collins, 2021).

The operation of gamma bias can be observed in accounts of men in relationships with high narcissistic female partners. Green, et al (2019) state that female narcissists treat feminine

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gender ideals as a resource to justify self-enriching thought and actions, and conversely, they obtain power and control by emphasising traditional male obligations to women. Based on interviews with male partners the authors provide the following conclusions:

*[F]emale narcissists were perceived to attack their masculinity and inertia as a means to maintain power and control. In fact, throughout their relationships, participants reported that they experienced sustained and prolonged abuse from their narcissistic partners, including psychological, verbal, and physical violence. Although the physical violence reported was severe (at times so severe that it warranted medical attention), the majority of participants considered that the psychological abuse was more damaging, whereby a combination of experiencing violent threats, cruel reprimands intended to invalidate their reality, and coercive control all resulted in what was perceived as a cynically engineered and slow erosion of their sense of self. These accounts highlight, evidenced by the data extracts above, the significance of femininity and the violation of stereotypical gender norms in the exertion of power for female narcissism. (Green, et al., 2019)*

Male participants in the study perceived their abuse by female partners as being overlooked by society because of deeply ingrained gendered scripts that assume violence perpetration is linked to masculine traits, and victimisation is associated with feminine traits. The authors conclude that gendered stereotypes and endorsement of ‘male dominance’ and ‘female submissiveness’ “appear to be reinforced and manipulated in their favour by female narcissists in their prerogative for power and exploitation” (Green, et al., 2019). The experiences of these men illustrate the operation of gamma bias and reinforces the added distress the bias causes for men:

*The reinforcement of gendered stereotypes conveyed feelings of distress and frustration on the part of the participants [men], as they felt their partners, presumed to embody these ‘feminine’ characteristics, were given the ‘benefit of the doubt’ and were able to deny that they were perpetrators. Notably, the participants’ narratives of victimisation were not only trivialised and challenged by society, but acted as a barrier to seek help as a result of stereotypical perceptions of masculinity and internalised patriarchal values. (Green, et al., 2019)*

#### 4. Institutionalisation of gynocentrism

Codification of gynocentric mores in workplace guidelines, social institutions and in legal codes is beyond the scope of this essay. However there have been numerous investigations of this topic starting with the publication of *The Legal Subjection of Men* (Bax, 1896), up to the more recent publication of *The Empathy Gap: Male Disadvantages and the Mechanisms of Their Neglect* by William Collins (2021), which looks at the gynocentric advantaging of women and disadvantaging of men across many domains including in education, healthcare, genital integrity, criminal justice, domestic abuse, working hours, taxation, pensions, paternity, homelessness, suicide, sexual offences, and access to their own children after parental separation. The codification of gynocentrism across these domains works to mutually reinforce the three elements named above; gendered customs, female narcissism and gamma bias.

The four-dimensional model above provides a hypothesis on how cultural gynocentrism is maintained, along with the narcissism it helps to en-gender in an increasingly narcissistic era (Twenge, 2009).

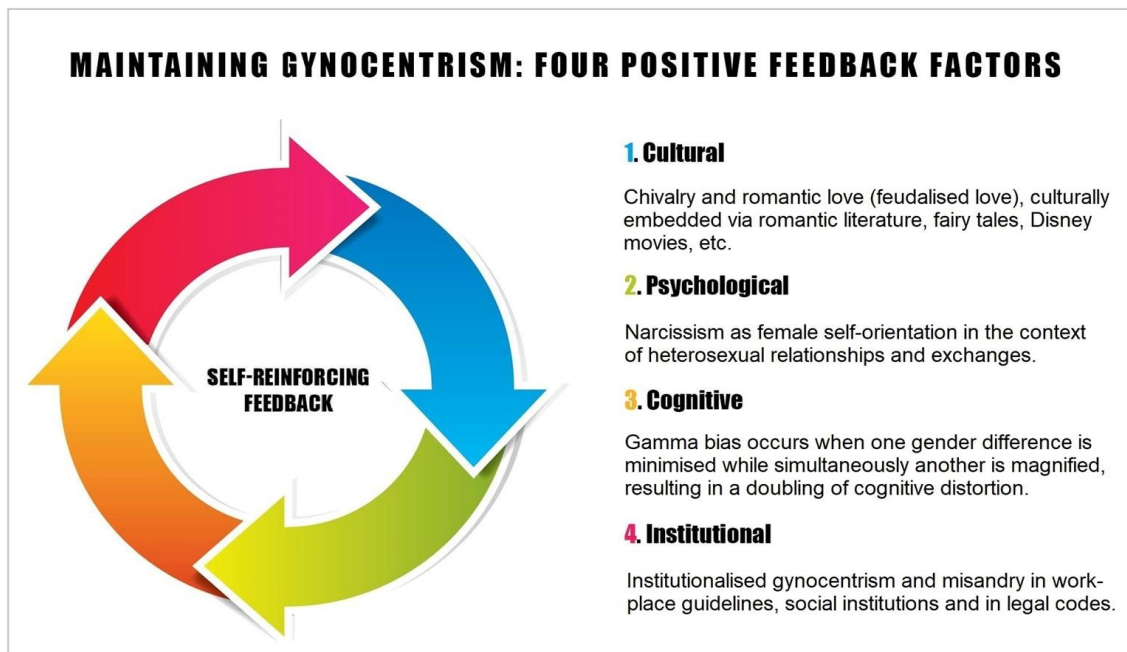


Figure 2. Maintaining Gynocentrism

The model is not aimed to reduce narcissism to an all-female problem or pathology, but to demonstrate the ways in which female narcissism may lean toward gynocentric modes of expression, much as males demonstrate narcissism in typically gendered ways.

The graphic (Figure 2) shows elements of a self-reinforcing, positive feedback loop which works to exacerbate the effects of the original stimulus—chivalry and courtly love (feudalised love). The effects of the initial stimulus on the whole feedback system include an eventual increase in the magnitude of the originating stimulus: A produces more of B which in turn produces more of A in an ever-increasing spiral of influence. This mechanism accounts for the centuries-long evolution and the longevity of cultural gynocentrism.

As with grandiose narcissism surveyed in part one, this study affirms that vulnerable narcissism has potential to be expressed via gynocentric means, and that gynocentric women are typically characterised by a range of narcissistic behaviours. Vulnerable narcissists display the added tendency of presenting as victims, often camouflaging their own abuses behind a mask of vulnerability and thus rendering male targets more difficult to notice or indeed support. This insidious dynamic ensures that male suffering will continue to fly under the radar until more clinicians make themselves aware of the themes outlined in this survey.

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