 Click to Print[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Intelligencer

In Defense of Narcissism

Palin and the pseudoscience of diagnoses.

- By [Emily Nussbaum](#)
- Published Jul 10, 2009



Illustration by Dan Goldman

In the days following Sarah Palin's resignation, nearly every pundit seized on one factoid, the juiciest tidbit from Todd Purdum's takedown in *Vanity Fair*: his revelation that several sources told him they'd looked up the definition of narcissistic personality disorder and found that Palin fit the bill.

For Palin haters (and I'm no Palin fan), this was good stuff: See, the lady is crazy! And not like a fox, like Kim Jong Il. But as damning anecdotes go, this one felt limp. I mean, who doesn't qualify for NPD these days? Bernie Madoff and Octomom have both been called on the carpet; ditto every politician from Dick Cheney to Bill Clinton. Heck, Palin's own party once argued that Obama himself (who has, admittedly, written two memoirs) was just another big-headed starlet, Paris Hilton in bi-racial internationalist drag.

Call it narcissistic diagnosis disorder, a compulsion to dog-ear *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in search of scientific backup for what (back in high school) used to be known colloquially as ♦thinking you're so great.♦ Although the American Psychiatric Association estimates that one percent of the population has NPD, other recent studies have put the figure as high as 10 percent, expanding the *DSM's* pincers to include stars both reality and old school; anyone under 25; CEOs and Ponzi schemers; anyone who uses MySpace, Facebook, or Twitter♦at times, it seems, anyone who speaks in the first person at all.

Now, I'm not denying that clinical narcissists exist. But perhaps it's time to call a moratorium on casual use of the phrase, which has become nothing more than a fancy way to diagnose people we don't like, a long tradition in America. There was borderline-personality disorder in the nineties, applicable to all crazy ex-girlfriends; repression in the seventies, good for anyone who wouldn't sleep with you; not to mention frigidity in the fifties, the handy label for all women unhappy with marriage or babies. These are moral judgments cloaked in a white lab coat.

Instead, I propose reviving the flat-out insult. Call Palin or Governor Sanford or Perez Hilton whatever you think they are: vapid, a blowhard, a repulsive self-promoter who wraps himself in the rainbow flag. There's a rich vein of invective we're neglecting for fake science, with its patina of compassion. (Get help, you egotistical schmuck!)

Besides, if we actually learned to insult the insult-worthy, we might pull back on shaming the innocent: Not all self-expression is narcissism in the end. And hey, maybe it's time to stick up for the narcissists themselves! Without them, who would run the country, the corporations, the film sets? Who would start the dancing at parties? Outlaw blinkered, paranoiac egotism and you risk blotting out half of Manhattan and several art forms. I love empathy as much as the next gal, but maybe a bit of monomania benefits the larger social pot♦and let's face it: Isn't the desire to be president by definition pathological grandiosity?


So if it's true that we're living in what Slate's Emily Yoffe calls ♦the cultural moment of the narcissist,♦ perhaps we might show a little empathy for the devil, lest the label land on us. After all, my enemy is arrogant, while I am confident. My enemy is prickly; I shrug off the judgments of others. My enemy is a crazy diva, a megalomaniac. I prefer the term ♦maverick.♦

[Next: Black or White](#)

Have good intel? Send tips to intel@nymag.com.

Find this article at:

<http://www.nymag.com/news/intelligencer/57883>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

