

## Narcissistic and Obsessive-Compulsive disorder: a different angle

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### *Introduction*

The attention trained on psychopathological disorders (both clinical and of the personality) has always focused mainly on identifying the so-called symptoms. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders (the DSM in all its editions) sets itself the main objective of giving a detailed description of the symptomatological situations that can be linked to a certain disorder so as to be able to help the clinician to formulate the correct diagnosis.

To give an example, if we as psychotherapists find at least five of the following nine symptoms in our patients: 1) great sense of importance, 2) feeling that he is special and unique, 3) fantasies of success, power, fascination, beauty and ideal love, 4) excessive demands for admiration, 5) feeling that everything is owed to him, 6) tendency to take advantage of others to achieve his own goals, 7) lack of empathy, 8) envy, 9) arrogance and presumption, we can say that we are looking at a subject presenting a narcissistic personality disorder.

From our point of view, while the help of any kind of diagnostic manual (ICD 10, DSM IV, etc.) can be useful in making an accurate diagnosis, it is insufficient in understanding the complex psychological dynamics that are at the source of our patients' suffering.

In other words, the narcissist is not only the sum of five symptoms; the narcissist is first of all a person with a history of his own, with his own culture, and with his own suffering, that makes him an absolutely unique person.

Having stated this premise, aimed at affirming the importance both of not stopping at the symptom, and of avoiding generalizations that do not take the specificity of every single individual into account, in this article we will try to extend the field of knowledge about two specific personality disorders: narcissistic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

### *A brief review*

From the theoretical point of view, the concept of narcissism was developed in psychoanalysis thanks to an important work by Freud in 1914, *Introduction to narcissism*, which marks its official birth in this domain.

In the past thirty years however there has been a radical revision of the concept of narcissism, designed to give a scientific status and an empirical foundation to a complex and many-sided clinical and existential condition. The traditional conceptualizations, deriving from various heuristic contexts, are not in fact able to reflect the complexity and heterogeneity of contemporary clinical work.

The study of narcissism has therefore undergone a real rebirth from the theoretical and empirical point of view. This has happened both in the field of social psychology and of the personality (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), and in clinical psychology and psychiatry (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1977; Masterson, 1988; Westen, 1990).

The term narcissism is considered one of the most important concepts in psychoanalysis and paradoxically also one of the most controversial. Its history shows the difficulties encountered by the psychoanalytical movement in achieving a sober, consistent theorization that can use the metapsychological formulations proposed to account for clinical data without sliding into ambiguity or facile abstractions. These difficulties were already present in the work of Freud who, not surprisingly, repeatedly said he was dissatisfied with his theoretical elaboration of narcissism and did not hesitate to revise it.

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To understand why the narcissistic personality has acquired such importance on the psychiatric scene that it was included in 1980 in the DSM-III, by the *American Psychiatric Association*, we need to be aware of some developments that have taken place in the social field.

On this point, a significant contribution was made by the famous book by the American sociologist Christopher Lasch, *The culture of narcissism* (1979); this is the culture supposedly characterizing the contemporary era of affluent western society where, following the collapse of values and other complex social transformations, narcissism has come out of the strict boundaries of the individual psyche to become a fundamental rule permeating all interpersonal relations. The author also underlines that the mass media, too, talk more and more about the “era of narcissism”.

The study of narcissism, from the psychodynamic point of view, has seen a stream of contributions which have built up a rich, solid body of knowledge.

Narcissism has therefore been studied by authors, the main ones being Kohut and Kernberg but also W.D. Roland Fairbairn (1941), Heinz Hartmann (1950), Donald W. Winnicott (1960), Herbert Rosenfeld (1964; 1965), Michael Balint (1965; 1968), Margaret Mahler (1975) and others.

On the other hand, as far as obsessive-compulsive disorder is concerned, there are some references and descriptions from the past that have made it possible to identify the characteristics of the disorder, without however attributing to it the slightest clinical-psychological connotation; for this, one has to go to the French school of the 1800s, which made a considerable contribution, along with the German, English and sometimes the Italian schools, to the in-depth study of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

The first description is attributed to Esquirol who, in 1838, defined the disorder as a form of monomania, a partial delirium, “*delire partiel*”, in which an involuntary, irresistible and instinctive activity pushed the patient to perform actions that the consciousness rejected but that the willpower was unable to suppress. The author came to the conclusion that what caused the disorder was a lack of willpower (a highly questionable construct!) and only secondarily a disorder of the intellect.

At that time there were three theories explaining the origin of the obsessive-compulsive disorder: those of the emotions, the willpower and the intellect, which respectively blamed “weakness” either of the emotivity, or of the willpower, or lastly, of the sphere of thought.

Between the second half of the 1800s and the early 1900s the concept of obsessive disorder was firstly progressively and clearly separated from forms of delirium, until at the beginning of the 1900s a picture of the neurosis was built up, subdivided in the forms of neurasthenia, hysteria and psychastenia.

In the obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (DOCP), the doubts and the curiosity about the possible relation between the symptoms and the obsessive-compulsive traits gave rise to a long controversy that has not yet died down. It was Janet in 1903 who, after studying numerous cases, described some personality traits that are still accepted today and included in the DSM-IV, such as perfectionism, indecision and authoritarianism, and defined the development of DOC in three stages (psychastenic stage, forced agitation, obsessions-compulsions proper) also explaining that the onset of the disorder was simply the result of the loss of some mental functions.

### *Moving on*

As we said in the introduction, the aim of the present article is to try to extend the field of knowledge about the disorders described, starting from the hypothesis that narcissistic and obsessive-compulsive personalities present (besides the symptoms shown in the diagnostic manuals) authoritarian and domineering traits as well.

But what do we mean by this expression?

Dealing also with authoritarian and domineering traits entails having to go back across the pathway of studies belonging to the domain of “anti-democratic tendencies” and which is led by scholars like Adorno, Fromm, Reich and others.

Since for reasons of space we cannot tell the whole story of antidemocratic tendencies, in this article we will confine ourselves to reporting on the most recent contributions.

So far, the most significant contributions on authoritarianism and dominance are those of Altemeyer, Sidanius and Pratto.

We cannot ignore Roccato (2003) who has the merit of having written a text that, at least in Italy, constitutes the most important and strongest attempt to systematize these issues.

Altemeyer (a Canadian psychologist) has the merit of having elaborated the construct of *Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (RWA) – while the Scandinavians Sidanius and Pratto deal specifically with *Social Dominance Orientation* (SDO).

Bob Altemeyer's model, together with Adorno's, is considered the most important reference work on authoritarianism.

Feeling the pressing need to re-think, reconceptualize and create a new theoretical and methodological foundation for the studies made up to that time on anti-democratic tendencies and on the psychological reasons for fascism, Altemeyer elaborated the construct of Right-Wing Authoritarianism, meaning by this a cluster of attitudes that distinguish subjects that tend to dogmatically submit to the dictates of the authorities.

Authoritarians, according to the conceptualizations of Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996), are subjects who tend to compartmentalize thought, who hold a variety of contradictory beliefs, who try to disprove the information they do not agree with, who change their principles to justify what they want and to submit to legitimate authority, and lastly who appear tied to traditional sexual values, being dogmatic and frightened by a world undergoing transformation.

In other words, authoritarians feel they are members of a minority who are right, opposing a decadent and sinful majority. Authoritarian people are characterised by a high opinion of themselves, they feel their moral superiority compared to others. They also tend to approve of traditional beliefs about the superiority of men and the inferiority of women and therefore to reject feminism.

Unlike the conceptualizations of Altemeyer, who carefully studied the followers of potential leaders (identifying them as the real threat to democracy), Social Dominance Theory concentrates on potential anti-democratic leaders. In particular, Social Dominance Orientation, which is the more purely psychological dimension of the broader Social Dominance Theory, is intended as «an individual variable referring to the degree to which individuals tend to regard existence as a zero-sum game characterized by incessant competition between social groups, wanting and supporting social stratification and the domination of "superior" groups over "inferior" ones. It expresses the «degree to which one wishes one's own *in-group* to dominate and be superior to the *out-groups*» (Pratto *et al.*, 1994, p. 742).

Social Dominance Orientation is therefore seen by the authors as a personality variable reflecting the preference individuals have for hierarchical, as opposed to non-hierarchical, intergroup relations, as well as the tendency to support the domination of specific groups over others. The authors postulate that subjects more oriented to social dominance tend to favour policies aimed at exacerbating social inequalities, while those that are less oriented to social dominance tend, in contrast, to favour policies that reduce them (Sidanius *et al.*, 2000).

Studies on these issues have so far concentrated on the analysis of the psychosocial sphere, neglecting the deep sphere. No study, in fact, has set out to investigate which psychopathological dimensions characterize authoritarian and dominant subjects.

It is this gap that is the starting point for this research.

Our initial hypothesis is that narcissistic and obsessive-compulsive subjects are characterized by the presence of authoritarian, domineering traits.

#### *Where we started from*

What is the connection between narcissism and obsessive-compulsive disorder with authoritarianism and social dominance? Which *fil rouge* unites the two psychopathological situations with two antidemocratic tendencies? These are the main questions that first set us thinking.

In spite of the lack of studies in the literature on these two issues seen together, we started from the hypothesis that narcissistic, domineering, authoritarian and obsessive-compulsive subjects must have something in common.

But let us go one step at a time.

The main *fil rouge* that seems to connect narcissism with authoritarianism and social dominance is *empathy*. Empathy, or the capacity to temporarily identify with the experience of others, seems in fact rather scarce both in narcissistic subjects and in those with authoritarian, dominant

personalities.

As far as narcissistic personalities are concerned, we are now sure that these are characterized by a low level of empathy. The narcissistic person, in fact, is too focused on his own Ego to be able to tune in to otherness.

On the other hand, also authoritarian, domineering personalities seem to be characterized by an incessant need to consider themselves better than others; a condition which inevitably leads to their exclusion. Authoritarian domineering personalities too, therefore, are distinguished by a lack of empathy. Specifically, McFarland (2005) was the first to postulate the existence of a correlation between low empathy, authoritarianism and social dominance, supporting his hypothesis with empirical data.

On a purely theoretical level, this hypothesis seems also to be strengthened by statements like that of Grunberger (1993) who described antisemitism as a manifestation of primary narcissism, of Rokeach (1947) who considered ethnocentrism as a manifestation of narcissism, of Fromm (1941) who distinguished between a degree of narcissism compatible with social cooperation (which the author calls optimal) and a narcissism (defined maximal) characterized by prejudice and by the distortion of value judgements..

And as far as the relation between obsessive-compulsiveness and authoritarianism and social dominance is concerned, what is the *fil rouge* linking them together? From our point of view, some typical characteristics of obsessive-compulsives (such as the need to check everything, rigidity, stubbornness, little cognitive flexibility, obedience to parental/authority figures) also seem to be typical traits of authoritarian, dominant types. No empirical verification has so far been carried out in this direction.

That is what we will try to do.

### *The research*

#### *1. Goals and hypotheses*

As well as investigating the relations existing between authoritarianism, social dominance, narcissism and obsessive-compulsiveness, we also set ourselves the goal of investigating the links with other variables, like *gender, occupational situation and political orientation*.

We subdivided the "gender" variable into male and female so as to analyse any significant differences, while we differentiated the "occupational situation" variable into four categories: self-employed, dependent, unemployed, never employed.

Considering the results obtained by Sidanius and Pratto (1999) about one of the three social group stratification systems (the one linked to *gender*), we put forward the hypothesis that males will score higher than women on all four scales under study (the scales measure Narcissism, Obsessive-compulsive disorder, Right-wing authoritarianism and Orientation to social dominance).

In the same way, partly repeating the insights of Kets de Vries (2001), who sees the entrepreneur characterized by a low sense of self-esteem and identity, allergic to authority, pushed to act out these feelings of inferiority in hyperactivity and excessive control, we hypothesized that the scores of self-employed workers compared to those of the other occupational situations, (dependents, unemployed and never employed), should be significantly higher both in the measurements studying psychopathological situations and on the scales measuring anti-democratic tendencies.

In keeping with the results obtained by McFarland (2005), we also hypothesize that narcissism may be an antecedent of Right-wing authoritarianism and of Social dominance orientation. We believe, in fact, that narcissists, authoritarians and dominant subjects will present common characteristics among which we identify feelings of omnipotence and greatness, egocentrism and the need to exercise leadership.

We also hypothesize that obsessive-compulsiveness can also be read as an antecedent to authoritarianism and to social dominance on the basis of the shared traits mentioned above.

Lastly, in relation to the most social part of our research, we put forward the hypothesis that, in line with the literature, the more authoritarian and domineering subjects will be positioned towards the right part of in the left-right continuum.

## 2. Methodology

### Subjects

The research was conducted with 208 participants aged between 19 and 66 (average age = 32.38;  $ds = 11.02$ ) and distributed equally by sex [Female (52%); Male (48%)].

### Tools

As well as a personal information sheet designed to find out their age, sex, and occupational situation, the subjects were administered a battery of *self-report* tools including:

#### - Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI)

The scale proposed by Raskin and Hall (1979) and adapted in Italian by Montebanocci (2002) consists of 40 items with a dichotomic response mode. This scale gives both a total Narcissism score and a score for each sub-factor (authority, exhibitionism, superiority, feeling that everything is owed, interpersonal exploitation, self-sufficiency and vanity). The factorial analysis, carried out using the method of the main components with Varimax rotation, showed the monofactorial structure of the seven sub-scales (Explained variance = 42%;  $\alpha = .81$ )

#### - PADUA Inventory (PI)

To investigate the presence of obsessive-compulsive traits the PADUA Inventory (Sanavio, 1988) was used. This scale consists of 60 items with a 5-point Likert response modality.

More precisely, the revision of the 5 factors proposed by Burns, Keortge, Formea and Sternberger L., (1996) was used. This version, in fact, gives the possibility of obtaining both a total score for the obsessive-compulsive trait, and the 5 scores on the sub-scales (impulses, washing, control, brooding and precision). Also in this case the factorial analysis of the 5 sub-dimensions indicates the presence of one single large factor (Explained variance = 56,80%;  $\alpha = .89$ ).

#### - Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA)

Authoritarian traits were investigated by the Italian adaptation of the RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1973) proposed by Giampaglia and Roccato (2002). The tool is made up of 16 items (the first two are included for warming-up and are not counted in the total score) with a 5-point Likert response modality. The factorial analysis indicates an adequate monofactorial structure and a good construct validity (Explained variance = 31,20%;  $\alpha = .85$ ).

#### - Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO)

To investigate social dominance orientation we administered the Italian adaptation made by Di Stefano and Roccato (2005) of the SDO scale (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The authors propose a short version of the scale consisting of 8 items with a 5-point Likert response modality. Also in this case the factorial analysis indicates a good monofactorial structure (Explained variance = 42,50 %;  $\alpha = .79$ ).

#### - Political orientation index

Political orientation was identified by using an index composed of three measurements: a thermometer of political self-ranking running from left to right, a measurement of intended vote and an index based on the closeness to Parties. In this case, too, a factorial analysis was carried out of the three indexes of political orientation, Cattell's *Scree* test shows a single factor with 77,57% of explained variance,  $\alpha = .88$ .

### Procedure

The battery of tools was administered to small groups (max 10 persons) in a private office which was quite quiet and light. The measurement tools were compiled individually and anonymously and the subjects were asked to compile a brief personal information sheet about their sex, age and type of occupation. The participants were told they would be collaborating in a research project on social and personal issues. The compilation of the tools took on average 25 minutes. Before starting, each subject was invited to read the instructions on the front cover of the test battery carefully. The instructions were as follows:

«Please read carefully the instructions for each of the following tests and decide if they correspond to your way of thinking and judging. Remember that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers: there are only personal ways of conceiving facts and people and we are interested to see the latter emerge. We guarantee that the questionnaire is completely anonymous, that the answers you give will be analysed along with those of hundreds of other people and the results will be used solely for scientific purposes. Thank you for the effort you will put into carrying out the task: follow the order in which the phrases appear, don't jump from one part of the questionnaire to another and don't return to the answers already given ».

### 3. Results

#### *The influence of the “gender” variable on the constructs under study*

The difference between males and females in the average scores obtained both in the NPI, PI, SDO and RWA scales, and in the NPI and PI sub-scales was examined using variance analysis..

Tab. 1 - Analysis of the variance for the “gender” variable

| Scale | $F_{(1, 204)}$ | Sig. |
|-------|----------------|------|
| NPI   | <b>8,13</b>    | .01  |
| PI    | 1,11           | .34  |
| RWA   | 0,54           | .51  |
| SDO   | <b>6,87</b>    | .02  |

As table 1 shows, there are significant differences between males and females in the scores obtained in the NPI and the SDO. More precisely, males tend to obtain significantly higher scores in the scale that measures narcissism ( $\alpha < .01$ ) than in the scale measuring social dominance orientation ( $\alpha < .02$ ).

Moreover, the same procedure was used to calculate the F values related to the subfactors of narcissism.

Tab. 2 - Analysis of the variance in the seven subfactors of the NPI

| Subfactors of NPI          | $F_{(1, 204)}$ | Sig. |
|----------------------------|----------------|------|
| Authority                  | 2,23           | .19  |
| Exhibitionism              | 0,46           | .55  |
| Superiority                | 0,51           | .53  |
| Feeling everything is owed | <b>5,22</b>    | .045 |
| Interpersonal exploitation | <b>14,08</b>   | .001 |
| Self-sufficiency           | <b>10,80</b>   | .004 |
| Vanity                     | 0,45           | .55  |

As can be seen from table 2, the subscales which show significant coefficients are: *sensation that*

*everything is owed* ( $\alpha = .045$ ), *interpersonal exploitation* ( $\alpha = .001$ ) and *self-sufficiency* ( $\alpha = .004$ ). In other words, compared to females, males tend to obtain higher scores in all three of the above mentioned sub-dimensions.

*The influence of the “occupation” variable on the constructs under study*

Variance analysis was used to examine the existence of possible differences in the scores obtained between workers who were self-employed, dependent, unemployed and never employed as regards both the average scores on the NPI, PI, SDO and RWA scales, and the scores on the NPI and PI subscales.

Tab. 3 – Analysis of the variance for the variable “occupation”

| Scale | $F_{(3, 204)}$ | Sig. |
|-------|----------------|------|
| NPI   | <b>5,74</b>    | .005 |
| PI    | 2,27           | .16  |
| RWA   | <b>3,63</b>    | .043 |
| SDO   | 1,82           | .248 |

As is shown in table 3, there are significant differences between the scores obtained in the different occupational situations both on the NPI scale ( $\alpha = .005$ ) and the RWA scale ( $\alpha = .043$ ). To be more precise, it is interesting to notice that self-employed workers obtain higher scores than those in other occupational situations. The *post-hoc* test indicates that the differences in the comparison of some pairs of occupational situations are significant. As far as the NPI scale is concerned, the self-employed worker obtains significantly higher average scores than the dependent worker ( $\alpha = .05$ ) and the never employed ( $\alpha = .005$ ). As regards the RWA scale, the self-employed worker obtains significantly higher scores if compared to those obtained by the unemployed. Furthermore, the same procedure was used to calculate the F values related to the NPI subscale.

Tab. 4 – Analysis of the variance in the seven subdimensions of the NPI

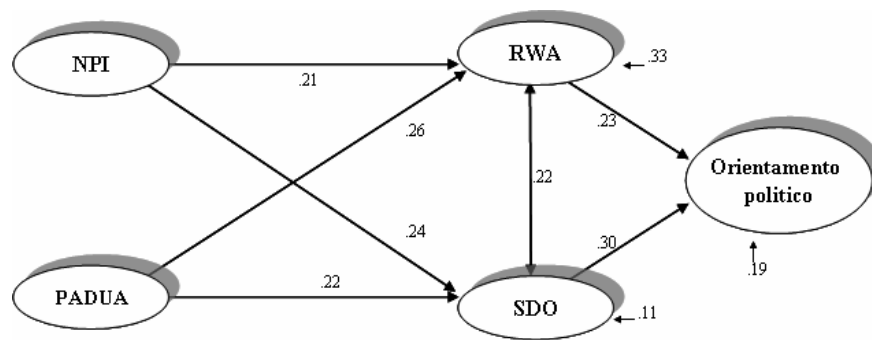
| Subfactors of NPI                            | $F_{(3, 204)}$ | Sig. |
|--|----------------|------|
| Authority                                    | <b>7,29</b>    | .001 |
| Exhibitionism                                | 0,14           | .95  |
| Superiority                                  | 1,34           | .38  |
| Feeling everything is owed                   | 1,24           | .42  |
| Interpersonal exploitation<br>interpersonale | <b>5,20</b>    | .009 |
| Self-sufficiency                             | <b>9,69</b>    | .000 |
| Vanity                                       | 1,00           | .51  |

As table 4 shows, significant differences are found in the subscale: *authority* ( $\alpha = .001$ ), *interpersonal exploitation* ( $\alpha = .009$ ), and *self-sufficiency* ( $\alpha = .000$ ). In the *authority* subscale, the self-employed worker tends to obtain higher scores than the never employed ( $\alpha = .001$ ). Equally, in the *exploitation* subscale, the self-employed worker tends to score higher ( $\alpha = .01$ ) if compared to the score obtained by dependent workers. Lastly, regarding the *self-sufficiency* subscale, the self-employed tends to obtain higher scores than both the dependent worker ( $\alpha = .008$ ), and the never employed ( $\alpha = .002$ ).

*Analysis of cause and effect relations between the constructs under study*

Below, we show (Diagram 1) the simplification of a model of structural equations for latent and manifest variables that can indicate cause and effect relations between the constructs studied in this paper.

Diagram 1 - Model of structural equations



$Ch^2 = 1259.77$   $df = 658$   $p < .00$

$Chi^2/df = 1.91$   $CFI = .912$   $AGFI = .927$   $SRMR = .040$   $RMSEA = .048$

The model, given in figure 1, shows all the significant structural coefficients ( $\alpha < .05$ ). Specifically, narcissistic people, as we hypothesized, tend to be both dominant (.24) and authoritarian (.21); equally, also the people with high scores on the obsessive-compulsiveness scale tend to be both authoritarian (.26) and dominant (.22). The authoritarian tendency correlates (.22) with the tendency to dominate and together they predict ( $RWA = .23$ ) ( $SDO = .30$ ) the right-wing political orientation.

In conclusion, regression analysis made it possible to identify the subfactors of narcissism and of obsessive-compulsiveness that determine the authoritarian tendency and the dominant tendency.

The analysis indicates that the narcissistic factors that play the biggest part in causing the authoritarian tendency are: *authority* ( $\beta = -.37$ ;  $\alpha < .000$ ), *feeling that everything is owed* ( $\beta = .20$ ;  $\alpha = .012$ ) and *vanity* ( $\beta = .13$ ;  $\alpha = .049$ ). As regards, instead, the narcissistic factors that mainly cause the tendency to dominance, we find: *authority* ( $\beta = -.14$ ;  $\alpha = .047$ ) and *feeling that everything is owed* ( $\beta = .17$ ;  $\alpha = .040$ ). Similarly, the factors of obsessive-compulsiveness that mainly cause the authoritarian tendency are: *washing* ( $\beta = .28$ ;  $\alpha = .001$ ) and *control* ( $\beta = .20$ ;  $\alpha = .044$ ). Lastly, the only factor of obsessive-compulsiveness that predicts the tendency to dominance is washing ( $\beta = .18$ ;  $\alpha = .049$ ).

#### 4. Conclusions

In the light of the results obtained, it can be stated, in line with our hypothesis, that the psychopathological dimension of obsessive-compulsive behavior seems to constitute an important predictor of anti-democratic tendencies. As far as the narcissism scale is concerned, while showing a predictive effect of anti-democratic tendencies, in the subfactor of authority it manifests an important causative effect in the opposite direction. The behavior of this scale therefore prompts us to carry out further research into this relationship.

Moreover, consistently with the literature, it emerged that high scores on the *RWA Scale* and the *SDO Scale* predict a political attitude oriented to the right.

By looking more specifically at the results, we can make some other considerations. As far as the "gender" variable is concerned, it emerged that males tend to be more narcissistic and dominant than females. This too seems to be in line with the literature. In fact, for Sidanius and Pratto, there are three main systems of group social stratification: age-based (due to which adults have more social power than children and young people), *gender-structured* (so males share more social power than females) and what they call the *arbitrary-set system*. The fact that males tend to hold more advantageous social roles than females would lead to their tendency to be more oriented towards social dominance.

As for the occupation factor, the results obtained show that self-employed subjects tend to be more authoritarian and narcissistic than those who are in dependent jobs, are unemployed or never employed.

An unexpected fact which has made us reflect, is that unemployed subjects have high scores on

the subfactor “*interpersonal exploitation*”. Montebanocci et al., (2002), in validating the *Narcissistic Personality Inventory*, found that the factor *interpersonal exploitation* correlates positively with indicators of suspiciousness, anxiety and neuroticism. This might explain our data insofar as the unemployed can use *interpersonal exploitation* as a defensive way to protect themselves from experiences of anxiety, neuroticism and sense of frustration deriving from their negative work situation.

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