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# An overview of the concept of narcissism

Some meanings existing in the social science and psychiatric literature are integrated, and some current controversial thinking is clarified

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The concepts of narcissism, narcissistic injury, and narcissistic vulnerability are central in diagnostic assessments and therapeutic interventions. Nevertheless, theoretical writings on the subject have remained checkered, highly technical, and often confusing. There is even, or perhaps especially, some lingering doubt whether narcissism is a desirable or undesirable character trait.

This article attempts to integrate some meanings of narcissism existing in the social science and psychiatric literature and to clarify some of the current controversial thinking on the subject. Further, a hypothesis regarding narcissistic development during the attachment period is examined for its implications for optimal mothering. Emphasis in the article will be on narcissistic difficulties rather than on the specific psychiatric narcissistic personality syndrome.

## The meaning of narcissism

The concept of narcissism was introduced into current psychiatric use by Sigmund Freud, in 1914,<sup>1</sup> adopting Havelock Ellis's

use of the term for describing self-love and named after the mythological Greek youth Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection. Freud used the term pejoratively, in that he contrasted narcissism with object love, the latter developing at the expense of the former, and in exchange for being loved by others. He distinguished primary narcissism, which he felt to be the natural state of the infant, from secondary narcissism, which he saw as occurring later in life, under conditions of physical or mental stress and illness, when an individual withdraws his libidinal cathexes from the object world and redirects them onto the self. The relinquished infantile narcissism was transformed into the ego-ideal which then became a substitute source of gratification and self-esteem.

In this initial formulation, narcissism is seen as an immature and self-centered trait, only indulged in at the expense of interest in others. Relinquishing one's narcissism is seen as a most important maturational step. It was also in this initial introduction to narcissism that Freud, not without apologies, decreed women as more narcissistic than men, an opinion subsequently elaborated upon by Helene Deutsch.<sup>2</sup> Later, theoreticians dealt with Freud's assertion that narcissism was a pathological character trait.

Erich Fromm<sup>3</sup> clarifies this potential confu-

<sup>1</sup>Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914), in *Collected Papers*, trans. C. M. Baines (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 4, 40-59.

<sup>2</sup>Helene Deutsch, *Psychology of Women* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1944), pp. 187-88.

<sup>3</sup>Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 57-63.

sion by differentiating between self-love, which he considers good and necessary, and selfishness and self-absorption. He equates only these latter two meanings with narcissism, thus reflecting Freud's pejorative meaning of the concept. In later writings, Fromm defines narcissism as "a state of experience in which only the person himself, his body, his needs, his feelings, his thoughts, his property, everything and everybody pertaining to him, are experienced as fully real."<sup>4</sup> Nothing else is seen as interesting or affectively loaded.<sup>5</sup> Fromm feels that a narcissist's sense of worth and identity is based on his narcissistically overblown self-image and on his ability to maintain others' admiration and adulation. When his grandiosity is threatened by criticism or failure, he experiences intense rage, a need for revenge, or psychic collapse. Such people are driven to seek success in order to survive emotionally, and they remain extremely vulnerable to even minor narcissistic injuries.<sup>6</sup> Fromm's ideas have been outlined in some detail because they have more than historical merit. They closely match the description of the narcissistic personality discussed by Otto Kernberg, the most current, cogent, and persuasive writer on the subject. Kernberg mentions, in addition, that such people's frequent charm and partially good social functioning hide a ruthless disregard of others, intense envy, and deep distrust and contempt.<sup>7</sup>

Theodore Reik and Leon Salzman, both object relations theorists,<sup>8</sup> reject the idea of

primary narcissism as being meaningless. Reik believes that an infant has no separate sense of self, and can therefore not be selfish. He emphasizes that self-love, in the good sense, can only be the result of having been loved. He defines narcissism as "the desire to be loved," and excessive narcissistic vulnerability as excessive anxiety about being loved, also based on the condition that at least some love, however ambivalent, has been experienced. Only in this sense does he agree that women, being less powerful, are more narcissistic.<sup>9</sup> Salzman points out that an infant is totally dependent and powerless, and that infantile narcissism, consisting of a sense of grandiosity and omnipotence, is not a natural state, but develops defensively, to cope with the infant's sense of constant danger, helplessness, and lack of control. The more an infant is exposed to those unfavorable conditions, the more he will need narcissistic fantasies for psychic survival.<sup>10</sup> Both Salzman and Reik are in close agreement with Kernberg.

Before discussing Kernberg, however, it is appropriate to acknowledge Heinz Kohut's contributions, whose seductive formulations comprise many of the current articles in the psychiatric literature.<sup>11</sup> Kohut states that there are two developmental lines: one which grows out of the parents loving the child with object love and consists of gradually maturing object love; and the other which grows out of parents loving the child with narcissistic love and progresses from a primitive infantile stage to mature narcissism. Kohut is not an object relations theorist and concurs with Freud in endowing the infant with primitive narcissism expressed as a sense of grandiosity, omnipotence, and a desire to merge with the omnipotent object. He

<sup>4</sup>Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), p. 201.

<sup>5</sup>This leaves open the theoretical possibility that the real difference among people lies not in their state of self-absorption, but in their defining their life space more or less narrowly.

<sup>6</sup>Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, pp. 200-205.

<sup>7</sup>Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975), p. 228.

<sup>8</sup>Object relations theorists are theoreticians who reject Freud's libido and instinct theories and view human development solely in terms of interpersonal relationships.

<sup>9</sup>Theodore Reik, *A Psychologist Looks at Love* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944), pp. 26-36.

<sup>10</sup>Leon Salzman, *The Obsessive Personality* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1971), pp. 162-65.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Fox, "Narcissistic Rage and the Problem of Combat Aggression," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 31:807-11 (December 1974); and Arnold Goldberg, "Narcissism and the Readiness for Psychotherapy Termination," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 32:695-99 (June 1975).

believes that persons with narcissistic personalities or severe narcissistic difficulties get fixated at this infantile stage. Alternatively, under favorable conditions, this primitive narcissism is transformed into mature self-esteem, ambition, a wish for mastery, dominance, and mature hero worship.<sup>12</sup> In this scheme, the capacity for self-love and object love develop independently of each other, and narcissism is absolved of its pejorative meaning and is pronounced as good and necessary, at least in its mature forms.

Another important point made by Kohut and by Gregory Rochlin, is to see aggression in the service of, and secondary to, narcissistic needs.<sup>13</sup> They both feel that man's worst aggressive outbursts — "narcissistic rage" attacks — are caused by wounded narcissism; individual and group, and thus, it is excessive narcissistic vulnerability rather than excessive aggression that is at the root of the troubles of our times. Rochlin feels that narcissism and aggression have been found together since early times, and govern the conduct of men in their efforts at survival. He believes this phenomenon explains why we feel aggression upon occasions of loss, sickness, failure, deprivation, and betrayal — all forms of narcissistic injury. Rochlin and Kohut agree that narcissistic rage is an excessive response which disregards reasonable limits, and that it has a relentless, compulsive, and revengeful quality. It can be directed inward or outward — in murder, suicide, and insanity. They both also agree, together with Fromm, that human destructiveness is at its worst when aligned with group narcissism, manifested by group ideals such as patriotism, tribalism, or religious fervor. While these are very persuasive ideas, Kernberg disagrees. Because the author has become convinced of the soundness of Kernberg's position, it will be explained here in some detail.

Kernberg defines narcissism as "libidinal investment of the self." He differentiates nor-

mal narcissism, both in its mature and immature form from pathological narcissism. Pathological narcissism, he says, is not over-investment in the self, nor immature investment in the self, rather, it is an over-investment in a pathological self, that has arisen as a defense against a frightening image of the world as being devoid of food and love.<sup>14</sup> He disagrees with Kohut on four points: first, that normal immature narcissism is similar to pathological narcissism; second, that the two lines of development, self-love and object love are independent of each other; third, that aggression is secondary to narcissism; and fourth, that the natural state of the infant is one of primary narcissism. Kernberg is closer to the object relations viewpoint than Kohut and, like Salzman and Reik, he sees both healthy and pathological narcissism as growing out of good and bad early objects in the infant's life, which become internalized as good and bad object representations.

Rather than seeing aggression as secondary to and as a consequence of narcissistic injuries, Kernberg feels that pathological narcissism is intimately bound up with infantile rage and frustration, and an integral aspect of pathological narcissism, a position which is quite compatible with Rochlin's formulation.

Thus, three theorists with distinct viewpoints have been encountered: (1) Freud, who saw a polarity between object love and self-love, (2) Kohut, who sees object love and self-love as proceeding along two separate developmental lines, and (3) Kernberg, who accepts Freud's opinion on the intimate connection between object love and self-love but makes a careful distinction between healthy narcissism and pathological narcissism. He agrees with Freud that pathological narcissism develops and exists at the expense of object love, but he feels the opposite is true of healthy narcissism, in that an increase in healthy narcissism leads to an increased investment in the object world.

Kernberg thus sees people as either developing pathological narcissism and bad object relations as a consequence of bad inner

<sup>12</sup>Heinz Kohut, *Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage*, in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol. 27, ed. Ruth Eisler et al. (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973).

<sup>13</sup>Gregory Rochlin *Man's Aggression* (New York: Gambit, 1973).

<sup>14</sup>Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, pp. 270-73, 315-17.

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object representations, or developing healthy narcissism and abundant object love as a consequence of good inner object representations.<sup>15</sup>

He describes mature narcissism as self-esteem, and normal primitive narcissism as a sense of diffuse well-being and an overall pleasure with life. If mature narcissism becomes injured, the consequence is a sense of self-criticism and dissatisfaction with the self. If immature narcissism is injured, the person will suffer from mood swings.<sup>16</sup> People can thus be endowed primarily: with mature narcissism, an unusual condition; or with infantile narcissism, characteristic of neurotic or characterological problems; or with pathological narcissism, which would characterize the classical narcissistic personality. Most people are a mixture of these three pure types.

Narcissism and defensive maneuvers

The defensive posture of grandiosity and omnipotence is present in most pathological developments. While Kernberg links it to the later development of the narcissistic personality syndrome, Salzmann sees it as an integral part of the obsessive-compulsive character.<sup>17</sup> Both of these conditions are characterized by severe contradictions in self-concept and feelings of grandiosity, alternating with feelings of weakness and inferiority. Salzmann asserts that the stance of grandiosity is a defense against feeling weak and powerless, and sees the obsessional structure as being in the service of maintaining an illusion of strength and of being in control. It results, however, in the opposite of real self-esteem because "it denies one's real assets and demands impossible superhuman attributes to overcome one's doubts."<sup>18</sup> It would seem that pathological narcissistic entitlement, so characteristic of certain personalities, must be understood as one aspect of this defensive grandiosity.

Salzman stresses that most infants feel anxious and helpless at least some of the time and to some extent, and that obsessional defenses are, therefore, universal maneuvers which can, however, reach pathological dimensions for some people during particularly stressful situations. A consideration of this widespread state of deep helplessness leads us directly to Harry Guntrip's ideas about the almost universal fear of ego weakness in our society.<sup>19</sup> Guntrip relates this fear to the hypothesis elaborated by Melanie Klein that many people are fixated at an early infantile paranoid-schizoid position. But Guntrip speaks to us in very simple language:

What are most people afraid of? The multifarious ways in which people are on the defensive against one another, in business, social life, marriage, and parenthood, and even leisure activities, suggests that the one omnipresent fear is the fear of being and appearing weak, inadequate, less of a person than others or less than equal to the demands of the situation, a failure: the fear of letting oneself down and looking a fool in face of an unsupportive and even hostile world. This fear lies behind all the rationalized self-assertiveness, the subtle exhibitionism, the disguised boasting, the competition or avoidance of competition, the need of praise, reassurance and approval, the safety-first tactics and security-seeking, and a multitude of other defensive reactions to life that lie open and on the surface for all to see.<sup>20</sup>

The author has been leading a class on small group dynamics which has a strong experiential component. The class goes through an exercise in which each group member anonymously writes on a slip of paper what he most dreads might happen to him in the group—the slips are then read aloud. Invariably, these competent, highly intelligent graduate students are deeply afraid of appearing foolish or inadequate, of being rejected, criticized, or discovered to be phony. Irvin Yalom, from whom this exercise was borrowed, reports the same results with some

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 263-313.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 317-18.

<sup>17</sup>Salzmann, *The Obsessive Personality*, pp. 162-64.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>19</sup>Harry Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1969), pp. 167-85.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

astonishment.<sup>21</sup> Guntrip says:

'There is a greater or lesser degree of immaturity in the personality-structure of all human beings, and this immaturity is experienced as a definite weakness and inadequacy of the ego in face of the adult tasks of life.'<sup>22</sup>

Many people spend much of their energy dealing with this weakness, which can be seen as some degree of pathological narcissism, an uncertain self-regard which remains highly vulnerable to narcissistic injuries. Further observations show that most emotional disturbances are related to this condition. As mentioned above, Salzman feels that the essential function of the obsessive-compulsive personality disorder is to ward off a sense of weakness and lack of control. Depressions too are increasingly seen as responses to narcissistic injuries, or consequences of defensive failures against narcissistic threats, rather than primarily disorders of aggression, guilt, and atonement.<sup>23</sup> Addictive personalities can clearly be understood in this framework. Alcoholism, drugs, and gambling provide people with a temporary illusory sense of power as a defense against their feeling of underlying weakness and inadequacy. Relevant in this regard is David McClelland's research which approaches alcoholism from a different, social-psychological viewpoint and still reaches the same conclusion: people drink in order to gain a sense of power.<sup>24</sup> This evidence is brought together to stress the author's view that defenses, and most emotional disorders, which are, of course, forms of defenses, must be understood as an individual's attempt to

ward off narcissistic injuries, or to cope with and hide a sense of inadequacy and weakness. It seems that recognition, self-affirmation, power, and self-esteem are the basic themes of human existence, more so than sex, or even aggression. If accepted, this view means that our therapeutic efforts must focus above all on narcissistic issues.

### The development of narcissism

Because excessive narcissistic vulnerability is such a widespread condition, the author is eager to explore the precise developmental difficulties that create it. We may look to Kernberg for elements contributing to the formation of narcissism in general. First of all, however, Kernberg posits a precondition without which narcissism cannot occur, namely a self in which good and bad object representations have become integrated into a unified self-concept. Without a self, there can be no libidinal investment of the self. Such a self-concept must be experienced as continuous through time, through various situations, and coexisting with an integrated perception of the object world.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Kernberg suggests the following as contributing factors to the formation of narcissism: the nature of internalized object representations; the satisfaction of basic physical and emotional needs; love supplies; esteem supplies; the superego and its critical functions; the nature of the ego ideal; and reality achievements.<sup>26</sup> A deficiency or distortion in any of the above factors will presumably lead toward some narcissistic problems, and it seems useful to think of the existence of a continuum from healthy to extremely pathological narcissism, with some limiting early developmental factors and other elements, such as esteem supplies and reality achievements that can vary with the external vicissitudes of life. It is a safe assumption that most people fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum.

There is general agreement that the first factor, the nature of the attachment ex-

<sup>21</sup>Irvin Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self*, p. 177.

<sup>23</sup>Edward Bibring, 'The Mechanism of Depression, in *Affective Disorders*, ed. Phyllis Greenacre (New York: International Universities Press, 1953), pp. 39-46; Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self*, pp. 167-71; and Salzman, *The Obsessive Personality*, p. 111.

<sup>24</sup>David McClelland, 'The Power of Positive Drinking, *Psychology Today*, 5: 40-41, 78-79 (January 1971).

<sup>25</sup>Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, p. 316.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 318-22.

perience, forms the core of healthy or pathological narcissism and the author's focus will be on that. The experience of having been secure, accepted, and appreciated for oneself, and allowed some control and initiative over one's life is thought to lead to a self-loving and object loving healthy adulthood.

To understand the formation of pathological narcissism, repeated reference has been made to the internalization of bad object representations, but there is evidence that allows us to be specific. Kohut speaks of narcissism developing out of parental narcissistic attachment to the child.<sup>27</sup> Kernberg mentions the cold, narcissistic and, above all, over-protective mother.<sup>28</sup> A frequent clinical picture in narcissistic personality disorders, through which we can understand milder but similar difficulties, is that of a mother who invades her child with her own narcissistic needs, and uses the child as a narcissistic extension of herself. These patients, says Kernberg, seem to have had a special place in the family, such as being the only child, or the most brilliant child, on whom the ambitions of fathers, but more often mothers, were placed.<sup>29</sup> It appears as if children who were narcissistically exploited by their parents may be particularly prone to narcissistic difficulties. In addition, such children may have difficulty developing a clear sense of self, because they remain to some extent mere extensions of their mothers. They cannot acquire basic healthy self-love because they have not ever been valued for themselves, but only as an extension of their parents. Annie Reich has described self-esteem as depending on the discrepancy or harmony between one's self-representation and one's ego ideal.<sup>30</sup> If parents hold up an

excessive ego ideal as a result of their own narcissistic needs and overinvestment in their child, the developing child and later adult will suffer from life-long dissatisfaction with the self, regardless of his reality achievements. Such people will try to reach their ego-ideal through driven strivings for fame and glory, or, lacking talent or opportunity, they may resort to defensive grandiosity, or finally, if their defenses fail them, they may become severely depressed, paranoid, and enraged.

This point is an extremely interesting one, touching on the vital issue of optimal mothering. Mrs. Portnoy, for example, the prototype of the infamous controlling Jewish mother, who uses her son as a substitute for living her own life, comes to mind.<sup>31</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, in an amusing book review pronounces Portnoy as a perfect narcissist,<sup>32</sup> and the author agrees. The problem is not simple, because many of these sons, narcissistic problems notwithstanding, do reach very high achievements and make important social contributions, for example, Sigmund Freud, Winston Churchill, and Franklin Roosevelt.

Conversely, history describes tragic examples of the potential megalomaniac destructiveness of narcissistic men who achieve positions of power. Understanding Adolf Hitler's extreme cruelty, in view of the fact that he had an apparently loving mother, has been one of the major human behavior enigmas of our time. In a recent article about Hitler's childhood, Helm Stierlin differentiates between two kinds of narcissism, connected with an expelling attitude or a delegating attitude toward the child on the part of the parents. The expelled, rejected, uncared for child may grow up unable to care for others because he or she has never been loved. The delegated child, on the other hand, may become so absorbed in fanatical pursuit of the parental missions that other human relationships become unworthy of his attention — the narcissism of the artist who is

<sup>27</sup>Kohut, Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage, in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol. 27, ed. Ruth Eisler, et al., p. 363

<sup>28</sup>Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, p. 276.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>30</sup>Annie Reich, Pathological Forms of Self-Esteem Regulation, in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol. 15, ed. Ruth Eisler et al. (New York: International Universities Press, 1960), pp. 215-232.

<sup>31</sup>Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1967).

<sup>32</sup>Bruno Bettelheim, Portnoy Psychoanalyzed, *Psychiatry and Social Science Review*, 4:2-9 (August 15, 1970)

completely absorbed in his creation. Stierlin finds Hitler narcissistic in this latter sense. This conclusion refers to the reflection, made earlier in connection with Fromm's formulation, that self-absorption takes very different forms, depending on a person's definition of his ego boundaries and life space.

Stierlin presents the convincing argument that Hitler was his mother's bound delegate, referring to their binding relationship and to his having carried out her unconscious mission, which is another way of characterizing a relationship in which the child is the narcissistic extension of his mother. Hitler was born after his mother had lost her first three children in infancy. She had been his father's young domestic, and her frail and precious son not only provided her with the status of a "Hausfrau," but also he was most likely her only love object, because her marriage remained distant and formal. Her motherly devotion and overindulgence is generally recognized by historians.<sup>31</sup> Hitler was subsequently exposed to a series of severe narcissistic blows — school failure, lack of recognition as an artist, social ostracism, and poverty.<sup>32</sup> One has the feeling that Hitler spent his adult life living out his revengeful narcissistic rage on a grand world scale. Heinrich Himmler, head of the Gestapo, seems to have had a similar mother-son relationship.<sup>33</sup>

The lesson to be learned by mothers is a difficult one, because the boundary between encouragement, belief in a child, and setting high standards and narcissistic overinvestment is a thin one. But mothers are always being urged toward closeness with their children, while being made much less keenly aware of the psychic dangers of excessive closeness and overidentification.

Narcissistic conflicts may not surface for a long time. The author was most interested in Kernberg's comments on the development of narcissism in middle and old age, matching personal observations that aging brings into relief narcissistic problems which the person,

while younger, had been able to manage. Kernberg reminds us that the confrontation of the physical, emotional, and social accompaniments of aging with the grandiose self can be devastating to the person and may easily lead to psychic collapse.<sup>34</sup>

*The Hemingway Play* by Frederic Hunter,<sup>35</sup> a beautiful play about writer Ernest Hemingway, illustrates this very phenomenon in Hemingway's life. The play depicts simultaneously on stage four Hemingways at different stages of his life. The underlying theme is Hemingway's narcissism, a driving force while he was young, increasingly creating shadows of grandiose coercion over his life, until we meet the old man, unable to tolerate his declining talent and public criticism, sinking into paranoia, alcoholism, and eventual suicide.

### Some conclusions

In light of what has been discussed, the author wishes to conclude this article with a reconsideration of feminine versus masculine narcissism. Two different questions need to be asked: First, which gender shows more healthy narcissism? Second, which gender is more apt to suffer from narcissistic conflicts?

Each gender has its own developmental problems. While sons are more apt to be exploited by their mothers' narcissistic needs, daughters are more closely identified with, by their mothers and there is frequently a problem of ego boundaries between them.

In addition, men and women express their narcissism in different ways. Men have more reality outlets for their narcissistic strivings; they are also more apt to be alcoholic, engage in antisocial activities, or commit suicide. Women more frequently use their children as narcissistic extensions, and are apt to become more depressed. The balance is a difficult one. Possibly, the only safe conclusion, in this narcissistic world, is that women should also have public arenas in which to express their grandiose needs, thus, perhaps, avoiding the transmission of pathological narcissism onto future generations.

<sup>31</sup>Helm Stierlin, *Hitler as the Bound Delegate of His Mother, History of Childhood, Journal of Psychohistory*, 3:463-507 (Spring 1976).

<sup>32</sup>Fromm, *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, pp. 371-95.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 299-324.

<sup>34</sup>Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, pp. 310-11.

<sup>35</sup>Frederic Hunter, "The Hemingway Play," unpub.