

Narcissism, Overview

Keywords

feminism, individuation, narcissism, narcissistic personality disorder, object-relations, psychoanalysis

Introduction

The notion of narcissism was fertile ground for combining psychological, political and sociocultural critique for much of the twentieth century. In the 1970s and 80s, narcissism became a key psychosocial trope, understood to be the psychological manifestation of a malaise running through capitalist consumer society. The concept has lacked serious academic scrutiny in the last twenty years or so, but it arguably needs rescuing from being cyclically rolled out as a tired conservative heuristic, and repositioned as a serious social psychoanalytic concept that can still contribute to meaningful critical dialogue about psychosocial realities in contemporary capitalist societies.

Definition

Freud was responsible for converting the metaphorical potential of the mythical figure of Narcissus into psychological currency, developing the concept in the 1914 essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction". Freud distinguished between primary and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism is a universal experience of the prenatal infant and the neonate, where there is no delay between the experience of need and gratification; "hunger" as an experience does not develop because satiation is instantaneous. As a result, the fledgling ego feels as if it is the sum of the world; because need goes hand in hand with its satisfaction, no distinction is made between "within" and "without", an internal and external world, self and other. This is the state of primary narcissism, an indistinguishable fusion of experiences, experienced as a sense of omnipotence or "oceanic oneness". Primary narcissism is a functional fantasy out of which the ego is born; it softens the reality of helplessness, and cushions the infant's growing awareness of the separateness of need and gratification, self and other objects; individuation is marked by our gradual dispossession of the narcissistic matrix (Richards, 1989, p. 39).

Secondary narcissism can be "ordinary" or "pathological". Because the total environmental provision (historically this has meant the mother) is responsible for meting out need satisfaction in a way where individuation can be gradually realized "safely" in the developing self, it is also the source of problems. Whilst some degree of narcissism is considered necessary for healthy development, the elaboration of pathological forms of narcissism depends on environmental failures, beyond optimal frustration, in responding to a child's needs and emerging individuation. What is deemed "appropriate" and "optimal" has varied from remarkably specific actions, such as methods of breastfeeding (Mahler et al., 1975), to general orientations such as disapproval, rejection and neglect (White, 1986). Basically, if a child's primary narcissism is adequately held and mirrored by its environment, it will eventually invest energy in significant others, safely absorb the narcissistic instinct into the ego-ideal, and extricate a sense of "me" from "not me" to the point of healthy independence. If it is not, then an over-expanded but needy sense of self can become established. This "grandiose self" systematically blurs the boundaries between self and other in a doomed attempt to reconcile experience with a fantasy of omnipotence.

The "symptoms" of secondary or pathological narcissism have been documented in clinical work since Freud's development of the term, and "narcissistic personality disorder" has been formally recognized as a diagnosis since the DSM-III (1980). Symptoms include self-aggrandizement, overwhelming feelings of vulnerability, hyper-sensitivity to criticism, idealization of love, disregard for feelings of others, manipulative attitude towards others, envy and a belief that others are envious of self; persistent fantasies relating to personal success, power, beauty, and brilliance; and pervasive fear of old age and death. Horney summarizes the twin essences of the diagnostic understanding of narcissism concisely, describing it as "appearing unduly significant to oneself and craving undue admiration from others" (Horney cited in Cooper, 1986, p. 120). Nevertheless, critical orientations in psychology and psychiatry have famously resisted medicalizing and pathologizing "problems of living".

Critical Debates

Critical interest in narcissism was piqued by analyses that drew attention to the political, social and cultural contingencies of narcissism. Though he was not the first, the most celebrated and documented of these accounts was Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). At its simplest, Lasch's argument is that narcissism is on the rise not just as a disorder, but as a more diffuse psychological response to the way social relations are organized and institutionalized: it is a cultural trait as much as a psychological one. Lasch claims that various components of contemporary society coalesce to create a culture of narcissism, and a kind of contingency trap in which norms and expectations encourage narcissistic individuals. This fuels narcissistic forms of psychosocial life, be it politics as spectacle, the corporatization of sport, the collapse of authority in family life, advertising based on the promise of personal worth, excessive fear of ageing, the redundancy of the "awareness movement", trivialized gender relations, a stupefied education system, or meaningless employment. In all these areas and more Lasch weds complex psychoanalytic theory, particularly object-relations approaches, social history and cultural critique to powerful rhetorical effect.

Late capitalism is a culture of narcissism mainly because it disintegrates the primary interpersonal ("object") relations necessary for the development of autonomous selfhood, largely by usurping the authority of parents, and instantiating commodified relations in their place. Once personal and parental relations are undermined, the boundaries between self and other never adequately firm up, are charged with affective imprints of need and dependency, paving the way for a potential retreat into narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence and self-sufficiency reflected in interpersonal relationships. This vulnerability is met by a capitalist culture that facilitates fantasies of specialness and omnipotence; and that presents a narcissistic hall of mirrors, reflecting back inflated promises of greatness and independence. Of course his argument is far more complex and detailed than this, and *The Culture of Narcissism* should be read in conjunction with *The Minimal Self* (1984) where Lasch attempts to address criticisms.

Lasch's thesis was by no means accepted uncritically, subjected in particular to some trenchant feminist critique. He has been accused of downgrading the importance of the mother-child bond and the psychological and social value of feelings of attachment, mutual dependency, relationality, and identification with others. His critique is arguably invested with trenchant social conservatism, in alluding to better times past, where families were obedient (to the father) and authority was respected, people more other-directed. It is also claimed that he fails to capture the varied and multiple experiences of agency which challenge conservative norms in contemporary capitalist societies. Both left and right have subsequently utilized narcissism, in much more general terms, as a marker of psychosocial fragmentation and/or selfish individualism. However, despite, or perhaps because of, the flourish of critical dialogue that followed Lasch's seminal publication, today critical psychologists seldom engage with narcissism as a concept of serious value. It still surfaces as a motif for cultural pathology, reaching epidemic scales in some accounts; raising the alarm on the dangers of social phenomenon from social networking to cosmetic surgery (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). At worst it is recycled as a tired conservative heuristic which associates the concept with irresponsible hedonism, libertarianism and vanity to rail simplistically against the erosion of community-spiritedness, authority, and "traditional" values (e.g. Lipovetsky, 2005, p.10).

Conceivably this is something of a missed opportunity for critical psychologists today. There are many practices allied with consumer capitalism that ostensibly resonate with a psychoanalytically informed concept of narcissism – such as reality- and make-over television, hypochondria, and body dysmorphia. Following Michel Foucault, a discursive and deterministic framework has been effectively utilized to interrogate phenomena such as these using concepts such as governmentality and subjectivisation; but a critical object-relations approach has the potential to fruitfully explore the emotional and intersubjective dynamics at play. This prospect has renewed salience in the context of the "turn to affect" guiding plenty of critical psychological work at present – a resurgent interest in affect, embodiment and nonrepresentational experience in subjectivity and relationships. Addressing narcissism through the lens of post-structuralism and object-relations and the turn to affect would surely be an advance on the normative and accusatory pseudo-analysis that seems to have become the concept's fate today. Theodore Adorno considered Freud's concept of narcissism to be one of his "most magnificent discoveries", but he was disappointed by subsequent attempts to develop it (Adorno, 1968 [1955], p. 88). Perhaps there is still time.

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