

**Transforming Narcissism: Reflections on Empathy, Humor, and Expectations. Vol. 28: Psychoanalytic Inquiry Book Series.** By *Frank M. Lachmann*.

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Reviewed by Kevin B. Meehan, Long Island University.

From the get-go, Frank Lachmann makes it clear that he knows his audience: “Oh no! Not another book about narcissism!” he imagines us jeering. But contrary to his concern, his new book, *Transforming Narcissism: Reflections on Empathy, Humor, and Expectations*, is a welcome addition to the conversation on working with self-pathology. Lachmann brings a personal, conversational voice to the dialogue; there is much here to benefit students and seasoned clinicians alike.

This book is not a treatment manual for narcissism, but rather Lachmann’s own transformational dialogue with Heinz Kohut. Using Kohut’s (1966) article “Forms and Transformations of Narcissism” as a starting point, Lachmann elaborates Kohut’s contention that archaic narcissism is transformed through psychotherapy into empathy, humor, creativity, wisdom, and acceptance of our transience. He focuses on the first three elements as a means as much as a product of transformation in therapy, and the latter two elements are discussed as hopeful outcomes of the transformational process therapy engenders. Noting that Kohut had relatively little to say about these transformations, Lachmann offers what he describes as a series of discursive reflections on them. He views these processes through the lens of psychotherapy as well as other developmental experiences, such as moments of artistic creation or early near-death events, which violate one’s own expectations as well as the expectations of others. He explores the gaps left by Kohut through both his experiences as a therapist as well as autobiographical material of several artists.

Lachmann has much to offer to bridge these gaps; he draws from his vast experience as both an infancy researcher and a psychoanalyst to elucidate how the interpersonal context has the potential to give meaning to our emotional experiences. The therapist’s own memories, experiences, and worldview all function as tools with which the therapist organizes his or her experience of being with the patient. Drawing on research from mother–infant dyads, he explores how transformations are co-created between patient and therapist. For example, whereas empathy is often discussed as something the therapist imparts on the patient in a unidirectional manner, he notes the importance of patients making themselves available to be empathically understood, reframing empathy as a dyadic process.

For Lachmann, transformations occur not just through having one’s expectations met, such as the infant whose needs are consistently fulfilled or the patient who feels empathically understood, but it is also within the “violations of expectations” that change occurs. Within experiences that defy our expectations we find heightened affective moments that can be transformative. These events can engender both positive transformation through surprise and delight, as well as negative transformation through traumatic or terrifying moments. Regarding the former, he discusses bringing humor and creativity into therapy, stepping outside of the expectations of patient and therapist alike to create moments of heightened affect that lead to new understandings and deepen the level of relatedness. Regarding the latter, he reflects on how early experiences of having one’s expectations violated may in turn lead to aggressively violating the expectations of others.

Part of Lachmann’s goal is to counter the unfortunately common pejorative discussions of narcissistic patients. He argues that these attributions stem from confusing the behavioral outcome of narcissistic pathology with the underlying needs that these behaviors express; “arrogance,” in other words, is not the source of problematic interpersonal behaviors, but rather the manifestation of an underlying process of maintaining self-cohesion. He argues for an increasing emphasis on “leading edge” interpretations that highlight the unconscious needs underlying the behavior, while de-emphasizing the more traditional analytic “trailing edge” interpretations that reflect the product of a process that is experienced by the therapist and others as defensive, hostile, or regressive.

Because this book reflects a series of reflections on transformational processes broadly defined, there were many points that left me wanting to hear more of Lachmann’s thoughts about the technical implication of his ideas on psychotherapy for narcissism. It is a credit to his inviting writing style that I found myself drawn to engage his perspective even on points of therapeutic technique that diverge from my own. I became curious to hear more about the links between his ideas and specific interventions.

The case of “Frank,” in particular, presents a compelling illustration of the application of his ideas. Frank, the patient of a female trainee he supervised, presented for treatment after being caught having an affair and with a long history of making obscene phone calls to women he knew, including his aunts, mothers of friends, and his mother-in-law. Lachmann thoughtfully discusses the limitations of trailing edge interventions focusing on the “perverse” aspects of his behavior, and instead advocates leading edge interpretations that speak to his desperate attempts to ward off feelings of isolation and vulnerability. When during the course of treatment Frank began leaving obscene messages for his therapist, she focused on the sense of safety in the treatment that allowed Frank

to bring this part of himself into the treatment. In doing so, Frank reported feeling understood by the therapist and became able to increasingly express himself openly.

Lachmann discusses the benefits of looking beyond the manifest aggressive behavior in order to climb into the patient's subjective experience to articulate the longings, needs, and strivings behind these behaviors. Although he clearly notes that he is emphasizing this "leading edge" aspect of his work as opposed to the "trailing edge," which he does not condone but rather de-emphasizes in an effort to encourage the pendulum to swing in the other direction, it remains unclear as to the technical implications of this therapeutic perspective. Would he encourage the therapist to step out of Frank's subjective experience and voice a trailing edge view of how the therapist and other women felt aggressed upon by his obscene calls? How would he go about such an intervention, and at what point in the treatment would this be the most beneficial move?

Lachmann takes the position that interpreting the aggression in behavior of patients such as Frank risks the creation of distance in the therapeutic relationship and can leave the patient feeling misunderstood. However, would he agree that by avoiding the topic of the patient's aggressive behavior, or reframing it as positive or constructive behavior, it may implicitly suggest to the patient that intimacy can be sustained only so long as their aggression is minimized or kept out of the relationship? Might patients such as Frank actually feel more understood through interpretations of aggression because it signals to the patient that the therapist can see them "warts and all" and it has not destroyed the relationship? Again, Lachmann does not condone such interventions, and may very well answer in the affirmative to the questions raised; but because he purposefully is leaving out of his discussion the "trailing edge" aspects of his work, his thoughts on when and how to use such interventions remain unclear.

Although there are limitations in terms of this book's utility as a treatment guide for interventions with patients with narcissistic disorders, as a series of reflections on transformational processes it is often quite compelling. Lachmann the therapist advocates using empathy, humor, and creativity, not to try to impress or demonstrate his cleverness, but rather as bridge to transformational intimacy with his patients. In many ways, there is a parallel process to Lachmann the writer and the manner in which he connects with his readers. Lachmann talks to the reader in plain language, avoiding the all-too-common pitfall of trying to impress his audience with jargon and density that leave the reader with a distant appreciation. Instead, he talks to the reader with empathy, shares his ideas with humor and creativity, imparts wisdom, and in doing so builds an intimate connection with his reader.

## Reference

- KOHUT, H. (1966). Forms and transformations of narcissism. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 14, 243-272.