
BRIEF REPORT

A Note on Everyday Psychopathology and Narcissism

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After reviewing the kinds of data used by Kohut in verifying his psychology of the self, we point out that little use was made of what Freud called "everyday psychopathology," a line of evidence with special advantages. We describe in detail a series of such behaviors with the aim of encouraging further exploration.

In developing the psychology of the self, Heinz Kohut clearly recognized the importance of theory validation in psychoanalysis. His own method of verification was heavily reliant on the empathic observation of clinical phenomena, though he explicitly acknowledged the hazards of such evidence.

The clinical situation reveals in a particularly graphic manner the transference-like phenomena that are uniquely addressed by his theory. These have a double aspect. First, they consist of the patient's unusual sensitivity to disturbances in the empathic resonance between himself and the therapist utilized as a selfobject. This vulnerability is expressed in marked, often severe, outbreaks of cold withdrawal, black rage, painful depression, hypochondriasis, sexually perverse behavior, and other symptoms of fragmentation sec-

ondary to ruptures in the self-selfobject bond. Second, the outbreaks and symptoms of fragmentation tend to subside rapidly when the empathic bond is restored.

Kohut suggested, too, that the plausibility of a psychoanalytic theory was enhanced both by the patient's experience of being understood and by improved therapeutic result when the analyst operated from the proposed theoretical point of view.

Another line of evidence which might have been employed by Kohut is suggested by Freud's (1901) *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Freud was able to buttress his arguments for the relevance of a depth psychology by illustrating and examining certain classes of behavior thought by many to be trivial: for example, forgetting, slips of the tongue, bungled actions. His analysis of these behaviors provided the reader with an opportunity for personal confirmation of Freud's views, not in the arena of professional practice (heightened effectiveness as an analyst), but in an analogous, less specialized arena, everyday life and behavior. Similarly the explanatory breadth of Kohutian self psychology might be made more convincing by the demonstration of narcissistic symptoms (as opposed to object-related conflicts over libidinal and aggressive wishes) in the psychopathology of everyday life. The purpose of this article is to contribute toward such a demonstration.

Kohut (1977) indicated his awareness of varieties of narcissistic reactions—responses to threats to the organization of the self that parallel the better known responses to anxiety generated by psychosexual conflict. In a section of *The Restoration of the Self* entitled "A Classification of Self Pathology" he wrote:

I suggest that we first subdivide the disturbances of the self into two groups of vastly different significance: the primary and the secondary (or reactive) disturbances. The latter constitute the acute and chronic reactions of a consolidated, firmly established self to the vicissitudes of the experiences of life, whether in childhood, adolescence, maturity, or senescence. They are not important in the present context. The entire gamut of emotions reflecting the state of the self in victory and defeat belongs here, including the self's secondary reactions (rage, despondency, hope) to the restrictions imposed on it by the symptoms and inhibitions of the psychoneuroses and of the primary disorders of the self. Still, even though heightened and lowered self-esteem, triumph and joy, dejection and rage at frustration are part and parcel of the human condition and are, in and of themselves not pathological, they can be understood only within the framework of the psychology of the self—explanations of these affective states that disregard the ambitions and goals emanating from the pattern of the self will tend to be flat or irrelevant. (pp. 191-192)

Because Kohut viewed the secondary states as nonpathological reactions to specific life events or limitations, he characterizes them as unimportant in the

context of his discussion of the classification of mental illness. However, examination of “secondary,” “reactive,” or “everyday” narcissistic disturbances illustrates the relevance and explanatory power of the theory for the “psychopathology of everyday life.”

A theoretical question arises here. Kohut (1977) clearly referred to narcissistic responses to events that were “part and parcel of the human condition” (p. 191) and that occurred in individuals with a firmly consolidated self as a reaction to environmental disturbances (secondary positions) rather than as a manifestation of instability or inadequacy of self structure (primary reactions). The question could be raised as to whether the primary versus secondary categorization is adequate or whether we might better be served by recognizing *three* classes of narcissistic reactions: symptomatic reactions occurring as a consequence of significant self pathology; reactions occurring as result of consensually agreed upon severe narcissistic injuries (analogous to mourning in relation to depression); and minor reactions that can occur in individuals with a generally well-consolidated self with only minor areas of narcissistic vulnerability (analogues of a slip of the tongue or a lapse of memory). For the purposes of this paper, this question can be left unanswered. Our focus will be on common, everyday reactions, whether regarded as “pathological” or “normal.” Such reactions permit an evaluation of the theory against the grid of everyday experiences as distinguished from the analytic situation.

One common and easily recognized set of such reaction occurs in the arena of automobile driving. Even well-analyzed individuals may experience an access of rage when another driver treats them discourteously, refusing to yield, or cutting in too sharply. One can become suddenly very angry. Obviously, in specific individuals and under specific circumstances such a reaction might have oedipal or (less likely) anal implications. However, such reactions occur in a wide variety of character types, and the quality of these reactions as they are recounted by patients and as one experiences them in oneself is often neither rebellious or competitive. It is something quite different, more a question of outraged dignity, of narcissistic injury.

Another related phenomenon was described by Kenneth Grahame in his classic, *The Wind in the Willows*. He captured in literary form the narcissistic grandiosity that can be involved in driving. He described Toad’s reaction when he commandeers an automobile:

. . . the rush of air in his face, the hum of the engine, and the light jump of the car beneath him intoxicated his weak brain. “Washer woman, indeed!” he shouted recklessly. “Ho! Ho! I am the Toad, the motor-car snatcher, the prison-breaker, the Toad who always escapes! Sit still, and you shall know what driving really is, for you are in the hands of the famous, the skillful, the entirely fearless Toad!” (1908, p. 152)

Another setting in which narcissistic reactions, albeit in modified form, can occur is in restaurants. On the face of it, restaurants appear to offer occasions particularly suited to triggering oral conflicts — and this is no doubt the case in individuals whose core conflicts are oral. Restaurants, however, in addition to offering oral gratification, offer occasions for gratifying one's grandiosity in their emphasis on service and what are called "the amenities." As if to emphasize the dual significance of food and service many restaurant guides rate these two factors separately.

The best waiters are not intrusive nor do they require calling. They anticipate the diner's wishes without hint or communication from the diner. Is there a closer approach in our society to the selfobject who almost magically meets one's needs?

Although not everyone is equally committed to the importance of service in dining out, those who are can probably recall occasions when a fine meal was "ruined" by inattentive waiters or environmental distractions, and in their emotional response to this circumstance can discern the consequences of narcissistic injury. Again, we recognize that specific oral, anal, or phallic conflicts might be touched off in such a setting, but we would like to emphasize that beyond these, beyond the issues of gourmandise, or neatness or competition, there commonly occurs a narcissistically rageful response to frustrated grandiosity and omnipotence.

Travel in a foreign country also can stimulate narcissistic disturbances. Fatigue and irritability frequently occur when one is alone in a country in whose language one is not fluent and can be understood in terms of narcissistic imbalance. In the absence of easy, frequent, interpersonal exchange, the customary mutual mirroring and twinning (self-defining and self-stabilizing activities rooted in early needs for affirmation by the parent imago) which underlie social intercourse is drastically attenuated, leading even well-adjusted individuals to experience mild fragmentation anxiety — the subjective dysphoria associated with disruption of self structure.

An experienced traveller, for example, can find himself unreasonably worried about getting to the airport on time, misplacing tickets, or getting lost. The awakening of these fears of loss of environmental control, and the subjective extra effort required to "manage" can lead to irritability and fatigue, and are manifestations of narcissistic vulnerability. The avoidance of these anxieties may also be at the heart of the tendency of many travelers to cluster with fellow countrymen, even with those that are strangers and have different interests. Interestingly, Kohut (1984, p. 203) has referred to the converse of these feelings, the sense of relief at returning home from foreign travel.

Though not falling under the rubric of everyday psychopathology, myths and fairy tales have been construed as lending support to classical psychoana-

lytic theory. More exactly, the analysis of such material yields familiar and frequent themes that are restatements of patterns seen in the psychoanalysis of patients. The oedipal configurations of Snow White and Cinderella, in which a jealous (step)mother and victimized daughter compete for the affections of powerful men are familiar examples.

There are, however, elements in such tales that might be better understood as expressions of narcissistic issues and which serve as support for Kohut's formulations. In the story of Snow White, the mirror to which the queen resorts for confirmation of her beauty ("Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is fairest of them all") is an evocative allegory of the role of the magical selfobject in affirming self-esteem, a mirroring selfobject. Frequent themes of a person in an enchanted sleep, often in a crystal coffin, to be awakened by a lover's kiss, allude to the living death of being detached from one's feelings, depersonalized, and made to feel artificial, in need of resuscitation by empathic contact. This same theme is reflected in the Snow Queen, when the young lad's heart is frozen by a chip of the Queen's mirror and can only be thawed by his sister's love.

The degree to which people idealize and admire figures or heroes in everyday life supports Kohut's view that even the very healthiest among us need to be sustained by selfobjects throughout life. These involvements may resemble oedipal identifications, and indeed, oedipal purposes can simultaneously be served. Phenomenologically, the oedipal identification will often be expressed in a relationship with the parent figure in which the parent's superior status is emphasized but in which the covert competition for the cross-sexed parent-figure is crucial.

The self-related idealizations are different, however, in that they do not include an unconscious competition with, and fear of, the admired one, but rather focus on maintaining a relationship in which the self is enhanced through a fusion with the admired object's values and ideals. In narcissistic fusion, the configuration lacks the triangular quality, and frequently there is an almost fetishistic preoccupation lacking any hostile component, with the admired figure.

Sports heroes are common objects of such idealizations. A youthful admirer will often have pictures of his hero in his room, wear a jersey with the athlete's number on it, and even try to imitate him on the field or in the gym. These bonding activities permit the individual to merge and be uplifted by the idealized figure's strength, capacities, and accomplishments. This use of the sports hero as an idealized selfobject is underscored by the personal sense of disappointment one experiences when the idealized figure fails at some critical moment in the game.

Rock bands and singers constitute another contemporary group of idealized figures. Again, it is common for admirers to daydream about spending

time with these figures, to wear shirts with their favorite singer's picture on it, and, as evidenced by recent Michael Jackson concerts, for people to dress like the star.

Actors and actresses form another class of heroes. A recent trend in advertising in which famous actors and actresses promote products depends on the consumer's wish to be like the idealized figure by driving the same car, wearing the same perfume, and so forth.

Religious, political, and military figures have been common objects of idealization. That they have to some extent been replaced by actors, actresses, and athletes represents something about the values of our present culture, but the consistent and everyday need for people to admire important figures as a supporting, value-enhancing aspect of life is further validation of Kohut's theory of self psychology.

There are also common preoccupations and hobbies where narcissistic themes can emerge. Kohut believed that flying dreams found in the course of the analysis of narcissistic personality disorders were often the expression of grandiosity. Of one patient Kohut stated, "his grandiosity was expressed in Superman terms; he was able to fly" (1971, p. 169). In everyday life, as in dreams, people who pursue flying as a hobby may be expressing a grandiose fantasy. It would appear that the current fad of ultralight planes contributes to such fantasies in that their simplicity allows one to enter more fully into the illusion of having the capacity to fly.

Similar activities such as skiing, mountain climbing, white-water canoeing, and other sports that require skill to surmount danger, are often in the service of acting out unconscious fantasies of grandiosity and omnipotence. In a discussion of skiing, Sartre (1943/1956) commented on the skier's mastery over the snow and states that in the depths of the experience of sliding, the skier is like the dreaded master who does not need to insist nor to raise his voice in order to be obeyed, an admirable picture of power. In mountain climbing, when someone risks his life to climb to the peak of a mountain and plants a flag signifying supremacy over the enormous mass, one may be laying claim to a victory from which is derived a sense of omnipotence and heightened self-esteem. A related narcissistic theme may be apparent in individuals who strive for self-sufficiency in a variety of forms, such as the insistence on building and repairing things themselves. The strength of craving this type of self-sufficiency is best illustrated in those individuals who spend more time and money than is practical doing tasks themselves. More than saving money, these individuals derive satisfaction stemming from the grandiose fantasy of being in total command of their world.

Finally, illness, especially chronic or fatal illness, constitutes an almost universally experienced assault on our narcissistic fantasies of invulnerability. Especially since Kübler-Ross (1969), a good deal of attention has been paid to the psychological process of adapting to imminent death. The model

that has been most often applied is that described by Freud (1917) and Abraham (1929) of mourning a lost love object. Choldin (1958) and others have further extended these considerations to traumatic injury.

Increasingly, the concepts of self psychology have been seen as relevant to issues of illness and death. In his last book, Kohut (1984) explored the relationship between disintegration-anxiety and fear of death. Earlier, Muslin (1971, 1972) described the psychological process by which transplanted organs became assimilated into the self-representation. Mohl and Burstein (1982), outlined the application of self psychology and narcissistic transferences to working as a consultant to physicians, nurses, and their seriously ill patients.

Briefly, from Kohutian self psychology we reason that although serious illness may sometimes (re)activate structural neurotic conflict — that is, stimulate castration anxiety, anal conflicts, and so forth — it is more likely to activate fragmentation anxiety. Serious illness is likely to be perceived as a traumatic impairment of one's grandiose immunity to misfortune or as a failure of the idealized parent imago to protect one, resulting in a strain and potential disequilibrium in the organized patterns of self-cohesion. Such a view is more compelling given the realization that many of the symptoms that Kohut and others have observed as a consequence of narcissistic regression (e.g., hypochondriasis, religiophilosophical preoccupations, narcissistic rage and/or despair, depersonalization, etc.) are frequent in individuals accommodating to the traumatic recognition of serious illness or impending death.

It is striking to read of the similarity of the phenomenology described by patients who have survived resuscitation attempts (Moody, 1977); or who have survived falls in the mountains, even when these do not involve actual serious injury, (Noyes & Kletti, 1976); and those who suffer major narcissistic injury that does not relate to health or physical safety (Kohut, 1977). In all three situations, hallucinatory feelings of being disembodied (depersonalized), hearing music, and meeting tall figures are common.

If Kohut's view of narcissism is well founded, it should be possible to identify adaptive typologies related to each of the major poles of self-structure — twinning, mirroring, and idealization — in patients reacting to the almost unavoidable narcissistic trauma of incurable or unexpected illness.

In summary, this article offers further support of Kohut's theory by examining the psychopathology of the self in everyday life, including the reactions to common situations, fairy tales, sports, hobbies, and illness. We have not made a comprehensive review of everyday responses. In fact, many others come to mind and could be explored: the irritated response to having one's phone call answered by a recording machine, the frustration when computerized business systems do not respond to one's correspondence, the extreme reaction when a possession valuable only to oneself is lost or damaged, ado-

lescent and adult infatuations, to name a few. The goal of this communication is to encourage exactly such explorations, and to offer as prototypes some examples of narcissistic reactions that we have styled here everyday narcissistic psychopathology thus adding to the plausibility of Kohutian self psychology.

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