

Infantile Narcissism and the Active Infant*

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Recent proposals to discard the concept of infantile narcissism as incompatible with currently available observations of infants pose a dilemma for psychoanalytic psychology because that concept has been of major importance in concurrent clinical investigations of borderline disorders. A reformulation of Freud's theory of infantile narcissism is proposed, based on Piaget's model of child development. It proposes that *objectively* the child is actively engaged with its environment from the beginning. *Subjectively*, however, in its own understanding, the infant does not recognize the world as external. Major phenomena of infantile narcissism are entailed by this model. Clinical illustrations are used to show its implications for the observed phenomena of borderline disorder in adults and children.

Psychoanalytic theory has been characterized from its beginnings by processes of conceptual formulation and reformulation, as established paradigms have proven inadequate to accommodate bodies of observation or to resolve conceptual dilemmas and new ones promised more usefully to do so. Freud was centrally occupied with such theoretical elaboration and revision throughout his working life. The dynamic, economic, genetic, and structural theories are among its major products. In the period subsequent to Freud's, further valuable theoretical contributions have been made. Of these, perhaps the most broadly influential has been the development of ego psychology. Currently, the extraordinary productiveness of infant research offers a major stimulus toward further conceptual growth, perhaps of comparable scope.

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Until recently, prevailing conceptions of infancy suggested particular characteristics of infants now sharply contradicted by observation. The editors of *The Competent Infant* (Stone, Smith, & Murphy, 1973), (the title itself speaks to the altered perspective from which infants are now viewed), quote a number of statements about infants of a sort that have appeared until recently in respected publications and that are now known to be erroneous. Among them, "The human infant is born completely helpless, at the mercy of its environment..." "The greatest part of everything which is going on does not reach the delicate system of the newborn. Only a few and very strong stimuli reach the infant's psyche at birth." "Consciousness, as we think of it, probably does not exist in the newborn,—but the sense of pain does—responses to these sensations, however, are of purely reflex character and are mediated below the level of the cerebral cortex." "The pattern of movements in newborn babies is, therefore, the same as that found in malformed infants who are without cerebral hemispheres . . . later voluntary movements become possible . . ." (pp. 3–4).

Within psychoanalytic psychology, too, a major conceptualization of infancy, that of infantile narcissism, is being called into question by new perspectives on infancy and currently available observational data. As Freud conceptualized it (Freud, 1914), the infant is entirely self-involved. The focus of its experience is the interior of the body (the rise and fall of tension). The sense organs are not cathected; consciousness is not attached to them. Motor activity is not action oriented to the alteration of reality, but is limited to affective discharge. A sense of omnipotence, expressed in the experience of hallucinatory wish fulfillment, and thought organized in primary process terms are characteristic of this period. The transition out of narcissism begins at about age 2. It involves a shift in interest from the body interior to the external world, a cathexis of the sense organs and the beginning of action aimed at the alteration of reality. This shift in interest (toward the external world) and in the functions of motor activity (to purposive action) carry with them a comprehensive psychological reorganization whose parameters are reflected in notions of the transition from pleasure to reality ego, primary to secondary process thought, and narcissism to object relatedness.

Two central aspects of this formulation are incompatible with contemporary notions about infants. First, while in Freud's view infants' focus of experience is the interior of their bodies, without cathexis of the external world, recent highly productive approaches to infant observation have been based on the premise that infants are sensitive to and in interaction with their human and nonhuman environments from the beginning. Second, while the conception of infantile narcissism posits that the infant's motor activity is aimed at affective discharge, not adaptive action, a central focus of infant observation has been on the character of infants' increasingly sophisticated interactions with their environments from the time of birth.

In the face of these difficulties, proposals are being made that the psychoanalytic notion of narcissism be discarded as not useful for the understanding of infancy or that it be significantly modified in order to achieve congruence with what is now known about infants. Lichtenberg (1979) shows that currently available data derived from infant observation require modification of generally accepted psychoanalytic formulations of drive theory, ego psychology, object relations theory, and affect theory. Among the increasingly well-established and accepted notions current in infancy research he cites and documents are ones specifically relevant to psychoanalytic formulations of infantile narcissism and incompatible with them, for example that infants are, from the time of birth, interested in their environments, and that from the beginning their activity occurs in mutual adjustment with the environment and grows in skill and complexity. Stechler and Kaplan (1980) on the basis of their and their colleagues' extended study of infants, undertaken within a psychoanalytic framework, conclude that psychoanalytic metapsychology, specifically including the concept of narcissism, is not applicable to the data flowing from direct infant observation. And Peterfreund (1978) cogently evaluates a number of psychoanalytic terms, among them the concept of narcissism, and shows them to be without clear and acceptable application to infancy in their present form.

However, to discard the concept of infantile narcissism presents other problems for psychoanalytic psychology. During the recent decades, in which infant research has burgeoned the concept of narcissism as formulated by Freud and developmentally based in infantile narcissism has played a valuable part in extensive and fruitful clinical investigation of the group of disorders subsumed under the term "borderline." Among those that appear to share common characteristics are as-if characters (Deutsch, 1942), persons with screen identities (Greenson, 1958), impostors (Deutsch, 1955; Greenacre, 1958), schizoid characters (Khan, 1960), and those described explicitly as borderline (Kernberg, 1966). They are regularly described as showing residues of infantile narcissism in various respects, their self-structures, their relations to their (human) environments, their orientations to action, and their thought processes. A sense of their own centrality in events and an incomplete recognition of a world external to and independent of themselves is seen to characterize their self-structures and object relations. They are observed to be without clear recognition of themselves as distinct individuals, in relation to others also recognized as individuals, and independent of self. Rather, they are described as perceiving others as extensions of self, as props for projection, as no more than need-satisfying objects. Purposeful, goal-oriented action typical of postnarcissistic activity is difficult for them and often experienced as being alien to their very being. Instead, their preferred form of activity reflects commitments to both narcissism and reality. Narcissistic illusions of omnipotence are generally observed to be pervasive.

A dilemma is posed for psychoanalytic psychology by the results of these concurrent lines of investigation. The one, infant observation, suggests that notions of narcissism are incompatible with what is known of infancy. The other finds residues of what is conceived to be infantile narcissism to be of major significance in the understanding of borderline disorders of children and adults.

A possible resolution of the dilemma is proposed here in a reformulation of infantile narcissism that appears able to accommodate both groups of observations. Specifically, it proposes that *objectively* infants are in active and adaptive interaction with their environments from the time of birth but that *subjectively* they are unaware of a world external to themselves. Their narcissistic unawareness of the external world lies not in the *arena* of their experience (the inside of the body or the environment), but in their *understanding* of experience that objectively occurs in adaptive commerce with their environments. This focus on infants' *understanding* of their experience appears also to make it possible to account for other aspects of narcissism, specifically the infant's centrality in its experience, the place of action, the illusion of omnipotence, and the transitions out of narcissism at about age 2. Moreover, it appears to be more congruent with observed residues of narcissistic experience in borderline conditions of children and adults than the formulation of these phenomena as originally proposed.

A PROPOSED REFORMULATION

Piaget's theory of cognitive development appears to provide a base for a model of infantile narcissism congruent with both psychoanalytically observed phenomena of narcissism and the data and perspectives of infant observation.

Both Freud and Piaget hypothesize that in the early days of their lives infants live entirely within their immediate experience. Whatever is being experienced (e.g., in grasping or nursing) *is* while the experience lasts. In Freud's terms (1925), the experience itself is the guarantor of reality. In Piaget's (1951), the world of the infants is one in which objects continually come into being as the result of the infant's actions (grasping, visual focusing, nursing) and subside into nonexistence at the termination of the experience.

In Piaget's terms, such incidents, grounded in the biologically based capacities of the infant at birth, are the basic units of experience, registered internally as schemes. They are the foundations on which all later cognitive (and implicitly social and emotional) development occurs. For present purposes these incidents are called *events*. *Events* and the developments based on them, I argue, have characteristics that qualify them as narcissistic in ways

central to Freud's formulations and congruent with clinical observations of narcissism as it occurs in borderline disorders.

First, the *event*, the basic unit of experience, is composed of an infant-in-interaction-with-the-environment incident, (e.g., infant grasps finger of parent; infant nurses at breast). The basic unit of mental representation, therefore, is hypothesized not to be a self-representation or an identification but, objectively, a schema representing a relationship between self and the human or nonhuman environment. In the infant's experience, however, Piaget emphasizes, the event is initially undifferentiated. The infant has no subjective sense of self, of action, or of object. These are products of later differentiation out of the (subjectively) global experience of *events*. That is, the infant, objectively engaged with an environment external to itself, is (subjectively) not aware of the environment's externality.

On its face, this is congruent with the emphasis of infancy research on the infant's active engagement with the environment. It is consistent, too, with Freud's conception of narcissism as involving a lack of awareness of the environment. It is the *form* of that unawareness in Freud's formulation (that the infant is aware only of its own bodily states) that is incompatible with infancy research. It is in the form of the infant's unawareness of the environment, too, that the proposed model differs from Freud's. The infant is not unaware of the external environment. It is unaware that the environment is external.

The narcissistic experience of children and adults with borderline personality organizations appears to show residues of the form of unawareness posited in the proposed model. The character of such persons' incomplete awareness of the external world is not observed clinically to consist in a focus on the interior of the body and incomplete sensory contact with their surroundings. Rather, such individuals are regularly observed to require constant relationships to others: the imposter requires an audience (Greenacre, 1958); the as-if personality requires a complement to the self-fragment being enacted (Deutsch, 1942); the borderline child, in its object hunger, requires an "other" who serves as the prop that permits the actualization of the particular relationship imagined by the child (e.g., Ekstein, 1966; Fast & Chethick, 1972). Kernberg's (1966) formulation of the structure of that relationship appears to be congruent with the notion of the *event* as the basic unit of experience. He proposes that the earliest, most primitive and basic form of introjection, that is, of mental representation, occurs in a unit composed of a self-image, an affect or motive, and an object image. That is, in the most primitive experience the individual is engaged with the environment, though not aware that it is independent of self. It is such units (dyads) that Kernberg hypothesizes to be typical of the primitive object relations of borderline individuals.

In sum, to posit that the basic unit of experience is the *event* in which the infant is actively engaged with the environment is congruent with infancy research. It is compatible in a particular way with the psychoanalytic notion that in narcissistic experience the individual is unaware of a world external to himself. Objectively, infants (and borderline individuals) function in interaction with their environments. Subjectively, however, infants in their earliest experience of *events* have no differentiated sense of an environment independent of themselves (and in borderline individuals that awareness is to varying degrees incomplete).

Second, in the *event* the infant is central. The centrality resides in an absolute egocentricity in the infant's understanding of its experience. It is the infant's own action that creates the event: Only when the infant is nursing does the nursing event (with its as yet undifferentiated components of self, the breast, etc.) have reality. In Piaget's (1951) terms, objects come into existence (subjectively) as a result of the infant's action, and with the termination of the experience they subside from existence. The infant is central *within* the event as well. In any event (e.g., child grasping finger of parent) it is only those aspects of the environment relevant to the infant's own experience that achieve reality (e.g., the parent's finger when grasping, the parent's breast when nursing). Finally, the infant is central in the way that it *structures* the event components of its experience. The parent's finger, for example, is understood only as a "graspable," the breast as a "suckable." That is, objects in the environment are not understood in terms of their consensually validated properties but in terms of their usefulness ("to suck," "to grasp") to the infant.

This characteristic of the experience of *events* is compatible with infant research and with Freud's conception of narcissism as involving the individual's experience of the world in terms of himself. It is *not* compatible with Freud's model of the developmental origins of that centrality in the infant's exclusive focus on its own bodily states.

In this respect, as in the case of narcissistic unawareness of a world external to the self, borderline experience appears to be more congruent with the proposed conceptualization of infantile narcissism than with the established model. Observations of narcissistic centrality in borderline functioning generally have little to do with the individual's central focus on his own bodily tension states. However, they do seem to reflect each of the three aspects of narcissistic centrality hypothesized to be typical of infantile experience of *events*.¹ First, in borderline experience relationships or complex events are

¹It would be well to reiterate something well-known but easily forgotten: Borderline experience and psychic structure cannot be viewed as identical to that of the young infant. To suggest patterns of congruence can only point to directions for exploration of the ways in which developmentally early patterns do and do not persist in later life.

felt to be in existence only while the individual experiences them. Deutsch's impostor patient, for example, successively *became* Inventor, Military Hero, Gentleman Farmer, and so forth. While the imposture lasted it included the patient's clothing and demeanor, his relationships with others, and the appropriate physical appurtenances. When it was over, it appeared to have vanished without a trace. A woman artist (Deutsch, 1942) described as an "as-if" personality became the student of one painter and absorbed very completely not only his technique but his entire approach to art. Subsequently, when she became the student of another painter she took on his methods and approach equally thoroughly, but in her work no trace remained of her former interest. The integration of the two very different approaches, which would have resulted in an individual orientation uniquely her own, did not occur. Borderline children, similarly, are observed to assume many discrete identities or selves, each of which is part of an entire relationship and environment, each as if without existence when not being elaborated. One such child, for example, began each therapy hour with a curious ritual in which he joined the forefinger and thumb of his right hand and moved them from his lower torso to his chin. Only later did he explain that, each time he zipped himself into the identity of one of his many Super Heroes, for the period of the hour he interacted with his therapist and the objects in his environment as if they were objects in the world of Spider Boy, Flashman, or another of his heroes. Second, *within* these event-like units of experience the self is central as well. It is the particular imposture, the painting identity being elaborated, or the Super Hero identity being enacted that determines the aspects of others and of the environment that will be accorded reality. And third, these environmental (human and nonhuman) objects are understood not in the context of consensually validated reality, but in the context of the requirements of the self's enactment (as in the play when a broomstick can be a horse).

In sum, in the *event* the infant is central. In this the proposed model is congruent with Freud's formulation of narcissism. The postulated *form* of the centrality, however, is not a function of the infant's immersion in the experience of its bodily states, but a function of the child's *understanding* of what is objectively an adaptive interaction with the environment. The three forms of the centrality of self integral to *event* experience seem not to involve residues of early focus on the body self, but interaction with the environment *understood* in narcissistic terms.

A third characteristic of *events* concerns the place and form of action. As Piaget conceptualizes it, infants' actions are initially global. The infant's experience is not of itself acting on an object. In the primary and secondary circular reactions of early infancy it is the action that is central. Differentiated perception of self and object are products of later development. That is, in an *event* the infant objectively interacts in a specific way with the environment (it nurses at the breast; it focuses visually on an object). Subjectively, how-

ever, its experience is of an “enactment” the bringing into being of an event that subsides into nonbeing when the action terminates.

This characteristic of *events* is congruent with the emphasis of infant research on the infant’s adaptive interaction with the environment, and also with Freud’s view that narcissistic activity is something other than goal-oriented action. It suggests, however, that the form of activity is not that of affective discharge exclusively, but of an “enactment” in which the active self and the object acted upon are undifferentiated components.

The proposed formulation appears to be compatible with clinical observation of borderline disturbances of later childhood and adulthood. It is widely observed that both borderline adults (e.g., Deutsch, 1942; Greenson, 1958; Khan, 1960) and children (Fast, 1975; Frijling-Schreuder, 1969; Kut Rosenfeld & Sprince, 1963) have significant work problems of a particular kind. When their work involves goal-oriented action, their involvement in it, which may be successful in social terms, has a quality of deadened, robot-like conformity, without self-involvement or personal meaning. When it involves creative activity or can be cast in creative terms, it is quite otherwise. Then they may become enthusiastic and optimistic, have a vivid sense of self and of their own efficacy, and be highly productive. In such activity they do not *find* a solution to a problem but *create* it by a process in which they “brood over” or “incubate” a problem until a crystallized solution emerges. The product is not an objective effect on an impersonal environment produced by instrumental action. It is experienced as a new creation. This creation is a self-expression in which producer and effect are indistinguishable components. Objectively, the product may be one generally described as creative (a poem, a picture, etc.), but it may equally be the solution to a technical problem, mastery of assigned reading, or cooking dinner. Subjectively, however, the preferred process of production follows the rules of creation, rather than those of goal-oriented action.

The creative process typical of borderline activity has the form Kris (1952) conceptualizes to be the process of creating generally. He attributes it developmentally to the period of transition from narcissistic to reality-oriented experience. Among its narcissistic aspects are the individual’s sense of “incubating” or “gestating” a problem and making it a part of the self, of producing it as a crystallized whole experienced as being a new creation, and of the product as an expression of self. The presentation of the product in communicable form is the contribution of the individual’s reality orientation.

These observations of the work orientations of borderline individuals are congruent with Freud’s recognition that the orientations to work and action in narcissistic experience are anomalous. They are not, however, readily understood as being founded in an infantile period in which activity serves only for affective discharge. The proposed model in which the infant experiences

its (objectively) goal-oriented action as an “enactment,” brought into being by its own action, in which self and what is created by self are not yet distinguished, appears to provide a framework more congruent with the clinical observations of later narcissistic functioning.

Fourth, the notion of the *event* as the basic unit of experience provides a model for understanding the developmental origins of the narcissistic illusion of omnipotence that is compatible with both infancy research and clinical experience. Freud posited that the illusion of omnipotence accompanied the infant’s exclusive involvement in its bodily self, but he did not develop a detailed formulation of the nature of that association. In the proposed model, two forms of the illusion of omnipotence are integral to the experience of *events*.

The first is a component of the infant’s centrality in its experience, that is, that the existence of an event is a function of the infant’s experiencing of it. It is the narcissistic illusion that reality is a function of one’s own creation (in Winnicott’s, 1953, terms, primary creativity). Within events, environmental objects are accorded reality only as they serve in the infant’s enactment. And the attributes assigned environmental objects are not determined by objective criteria but by their place in the infant’s experience. Omnipotence in this case does not mean that the infant has a sense of personal powers of creation and destruction (though the infantile experience may be the base for later notions of that sort). Observably, however, the infant’s world as the infant experiences it is created by its own actions and understandings.

The second is the illusion that one’s thoughts carry with them the actualities to which they refer, a form of omnipotence typically referred to as the omnipotence of the wish. In Piaget’s model, the infant, in its earliest experience, cannot think beyond the present event. Thought and the referents of thought (what is thought about) are not distinguished. To say that the *thought*, infant nursing at breast, can occur only when the sensorimotor scheme of the infant’s action, nursing at breast, is activated may be useful for purposes of clarification. In Piaget’s model of the infant’s experience, however, there is only one undifferentiated internal representation. The capacity to have the thought without the sensorimotor enactment is a product of later differentiation. Initially, therefore, whenever a mental representation (e.g., infant nursing at breast) occurs the actuality is also present. The omnipotence of thought, in the sense that the thought carries with it the relevant actuality is, in this model, a *fact of the infant’s experience*. The infant cannot think anything outside what is immediately present. Therefore, whatever it thinks is accompanied by the relevant reality.

This form of “omnipotence,” as well as the others, is congruent with notions of the infant in increasingly adaptive interchange with its environment. Only later, when thought can occur independently of the present reality, is it unrealistic to anticipate (wish or demand) that one’s thoughts evoke the actu-

alities to which they refer. It is this unrealistic expectation that is observed in the narcissistic illusions of omnipotence in the borderline disturbances of children and adults.

Fifth, and finally, the proposed model for a reformulation of infantile narcissism proposes that developments in the experience of *events* culminate in major psychological reorientations at about age 2, the period in which Freud's model is significant for the transition out of narcissism. The two models posit significant changes in comparable areas of psychological functioning. At that time in its development the child is hypothesized in both models to become focally aware of a world (human and nonhuman) external to itself and governed by its own rules. A radical change in orientation begins, in which the narcissistic (or egocentric) perception of reality in terms of oneself is gradually replaced by the perception and validation of one's self and one's experience in terms of the world at large. A sense of personal efficacy in instrumental action becomes prominent. Illusions of omnipotence are gradually given up. A new order of thought becomes possible.

However, the specifics of Freud's model of the child's transition out of narcissism are not consistent with what is now known about infants. Its central tenet is that these changes are a function of the child's turn from an exclusive preoccupation with its own tension states, to an awareness of the external environment and to an interest in actions to alter it. The developments from pleasure to reality ego and from primary to secondary process thought accompany this shift in interest to a new arena of experience. It is this central proposition that the transition out of narcissism at about age 2 is a function of a previously absent interest in the environment and in the notion that motor activity only now begins to function as action to alter reality that Freud's formulation is incompatible with the products and perspectives of infant research.

The proposed model offers a framework for understanding the transition out of narcissism that avoids these difficulties and appears potentially to be satisfactory in other respects as well. It suggests that, from the beginning, complex and interrelated changes, which have two eventual outcomes, occur in the infant's experience and understanding of *events*. They result in narcissistic modes of organizing experience becoming untenable, thus making a reorganization *necessary*, and they prepare the way for such a reorganization, thus making it *possible*.

Two major processes of change relevant to the purposes of this presentation can be indicated, though an extensive elaboration of them is not appropriate here. One of these follows Piaget's notion of "objectification." It is the process by which event components (e.g., self, other, motive, or action, time, space, etc.) become differentiated out of *events* and independent of them. As Piaget conceives it, complex schemes representing particular actions (e.g., grasping, visual focusing, nursing) are formed as those actions are performed

over and over again. Objectification occurs as complex schemes (e.g., of grasp and of vision) become integrated with one another. When the infant is able, for example, to focus visually on a ring and to grasp it, the ring, previously differentially experienced as a "seeable" in one scheme and a "graspable" in another, becomes a seeable-graspable, and becomes to that extent independent of either scheme. As objectification continues, the various event components become increasingly free of embeddedness in events and become objectified in terms of particular attributes. The ring becomes subjectively a seeable-graspable-suckable. The infant self, increasingly objectified as it is engaged simultaneously in more than one schema, becomes a seer-grasper, then a seer-grasper-mouther, and so forth. By 6 months, Piaget observes, the infant, in "making interesting sights last" shows signs of personal intention. Self as purposive is added to the increasingly objectified whole. By about 9 months of age objects are sufficiently objectified (independent of the infant-created event) that when an object is hidden behind a pillow (and so outside the immediate *event*) it sufficiently retains existence in the infant's experience for the infant to hunt for it. Further developments in objectification may be observed in the infant's increasing ability to perceive objects as independent of its own actions, in interest in objects' behavior governed by their own rules, in libidinal object constancy (objects' continued subjective existence independent of the infant's affect), and so forth.

In another line of development, the infant's global experiencing of events, in which thought and the objects of thought are not differentiated, begins to develop toward experience in which they are. This differentiation process establishes *both* the capacity for symbolic thought and the subjective experience of a stable external world (specifically a world independent of the infant's experiencing of it). Nodal points in that development can be traced in Piaget's observations. He observes that at age 6 months an infant's excited interest in an object (e.g., a toy duck) instantly vanishes when the object is no longer within experience (is lost from view). However, at 9 months, the infant hunts for the duck when it is removed from sight. To hunt for a nonvisible object requires that cognition be able to deal with an object in its (at first momentary) absence. An organization of thought or imagination not tied to present physical reality (i.e., of symbolic thought) is being constituted. The obverse is equally true. To hunt for a duck that is not within immediate experience requires that the duck have existence for the child even when it is not being experienced. A world independent of the experiencing self (object constancy; an "external" world) is being established.

These lines of development undermine all four of the aspects of narcissism described as characteristic of the earliest experience of events. First, the global experience of events in which self is not differentiated from the (objectively) external world is undermined as objectification increasingly articulates the existence and distinctive attributes of self and objects, and when the

differentiation of thought from actuality establishes an increasingly permanent reality independent of one's experience of it. Second, the narcissistic sense of self as central in creating events is no longer supported by experience when objects are recognized to continue in existence even when they are not being experienced. Self as central within events in determining what aspects of the environment have reality and in determining their attributes is no longer a fact of experience when objects are increasingly known to have permanence in both their existence and their attributes. Third, "enactment," the sense of an undifferentiated expression of an event as a whole becomes modified as self becomes objectified and a sense of personal intention becomes one of its attributes. Fourth, illusions of omnipotence are called into question when the centrality of self in the creation and character of events is no longer absolute and when thought may or may not be accompanied by the actualities to which it refers.

By about age 2, these major aspects of narcissistic experience, initially integral to the infant's cognitive organization are no longer supported in the child's experience. A new mode of understanding is required.

The same developments that undermine the narcissism of the early experience of *events* also set the stage for the transition out of narcissism. In Freud's view, the transition results from the child's interest in the external world as a new arena of experience. It is the turn to the external world that brings with it a new orientation to action, a major cognitive change (from primary to secondary process thought), and a perception of oneself and one's experience in the context of the larger reality (the transition from pleasure to reality ego). In the proposed model, the transition out of narcissism represents a reorganization of the child's *understanding* of experiences familiar since birth, and is the culmination of processes (among them objectification and the differentiation of thought from the actualities to which it refers) that from birth have modified the absolute narcissism of the earliest experience of events. It is these processes that, by about age 2, make possible a new order of thought (symbolic thought), a new orientation to reality (the world recognized as external), a replacement of "enactment" by instrumental action, and a perception of oneself and one's experience in the context of a reality independent of self.

First, the increasingly complete differentiation of thought from the actualities to which it refers eventuates in symbolic thought (thought in the absence of its referents). Experience (thought, imagination, etc.) is consequently freed from the shackles of the present. Comparison and contrast, the resolution of discrepancy, judgment, and the differentiation and integration of experience all becomes possible and contribute to every aspect of the transition, most particularly to reality testing.

Second, the same differentiation process by which symbolic thought is freed from the actualities of the present experience also results in the child's

new orientation to an external world, that is, the child's experience of its environment as external. (Its beginnings are illustrated in the infant's ability at 9 months both to think about the hidden duck in its absence [symbolic thought], and to know that the duck continues to exist though it is outside the child's sensorimotor experiences [the external world].) By about age 2, the recognition of a world independent of self is relatively securely established.

This model is congruent with Freud's in suggesting that at about age 2 the child begins to orient itself to an external world. It proposes, however, that the child was not previously unaware of its environment, but that modifications in its cognitive capacities now make it possible to recognize the environment to be external.

Third, the transition out of narcissism is hypothesized to result in changes in the character of "action." In Freud's model, it is a change from motor activity for purposes of affect discharge, to action aimed at the alteration of reality. In the proposed model, the infant has objectively been actively and adaptively engaged with the environment since birth. Its own experience initially, however, is of an "enactment," the undifferentiated bringing into being of an event. As self and object (as well as other event components) become objectified, intention (self as actor on an environment independent of self) becomes established. The change in the organization of action in the transition out of narcissism, therefore, is hypothesized in this model, as in Freud's, to be toward a capacity for instrumental, goal-oriented action. It is not, as in Freud's model, that the child was previously objectively unengaged in such action. Rather, the change is from the child's *experience* of its objectively instrumental actions as "enactments," to a sense of self as actor on an environment independent of self.

Fourth, the child is hypothesized to make what has been compared to a Copernican revolution, from an orientation in which the world is understood in terms of the self to one in which even the self is understood in terms of the dimensions of external reality. In Freud's model this change (from pleasure ego to reality ego and reality testing) accompanies, in ways not clearly delineated, the child's move from a focus only in its own body to its beginning cathexis of the external world. In the proposed model, by about age 2 the infant's sense of its own centrality in existence is no longer supported in its experience. The notion, "If I experience it, it is" is no longer tenable when objects are known to exist even when not being experienced and when experience (in thought or imagination) is often *not* accompanied by the relevant reality. That is, one's thought (experience) can no longer be the guarantor of reality. The match, or lack of it, between one's thought and the actuality must be explored. This exploration (reality testing) is made possible by the child's increasingly secure sense, by this time, of a world external to itself and the capacity for symbolic thought, which enables the child to make the judgements required when thought (wish, perception) is tested against a reality outside the self.

In sum, a paradigm that takes the *event* as the basic unit of experience in infancy appears able to account for significant characteristics of narcissism as delineated by Freud and observed in borderline disorders. The notion of the *event* is based on Piaget's formulations of infant cognitive organization. In its emphasis on the infant as in active and adaptive engagement with the environment it is congruent with currently available observations of infancy. Analysis of event characteristics suggests that the *event* also has major properties attributed to infantile narcissism. Among these are notions of the infant as unaware of a world external to itself, or the centrality of the infant in its experience, of the particular nature of the infant's activity, and of illusions of omnipotence. Developments from the time of birth (e.g., in objectification and in the differentiation of thought from its referents) are hypothesized gradually to undermine each of these aspects of narcissistic experiencing. At about age 2 these processes culminate in a major cognitive reorganization whose characteristics are congruent with those postulated by Freud as central to the transition out of narcissism (a new relation to external reality, a new orientation to instrumental action, a new cognitive capacity). In the proposed model, however, the reorganization is not attributed to a previously absent interest in the environment and orientation toward adaptive action, notions that are incompatible with current perspectives on infancy. It is predicated instead on a cognitive reorganization, the child's new *understanding* of its experience. The forms taken by narcissistic residues in borderline disorders appear to be more readily accommodated in the proposed paradigm than in the currently accepted one.

DISCUSSION

The value of a theoretical model depends centrally on its usefulness in accommodating accepted observations and its capacity to resolve pressing problems that have resulted in dissatisfactions with previously accepted models. With regard to the proposed reformulation of the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism, it depends on how capable the model is of accommodating significant phenomena of narcissistic experience, and its potential for resolving the dilemma posed by a theory of infantile narcissism that is incompatible with accepted observations derived from observations of infancy.

The proposed model does appear to resolve the dilemma. Centrally, the psychoanalytic view of the infant as focused entirely on the interior of its own body (the rise and fall of tension states), neither alert to nor interested in its environment, and of motor activity functioning solely as affect (tension) discharge rather than adaptively, are most centrally incompatible with the views informing infancy research, of infants as being from the first in active and adaptive interaction with their human and nonhuman environments. In the proposed model a distinction between the objective and subjective points the

way to a possible resolution of the problem. Objectively, it suggests, infant experience occurs in active and adaptive interaction with the environment. It is in infants' *understanding* of their experience that narcissistic phenomena may be found.

Beyond these basic requirements, the value of this conceptual model will depend on the extent to which it is useful in application to wider areas of psychoanalytic observation and theory. The body of the paper has suggested some ways in which it may more effectively accommodate clinical observations of narcissism in borderline disorders than the established model. Borderline individuals' incomplete awareness of the external world appears to be more usefully formulated as reflecting residues of an infantile mode of *understanding* their interactions with the environment than of a period of development in which they were in incomplete sensory contact with it. Their experience of themselves as central seems less well understood as a residue of a developmentally early period in which they were aware only of their own bodily states than as reflecting an infantile egocentrism inherent in their cognitive organization. The patterns of their difficulties in work and instrumental action appear to reflect the enactments of the primitive experience of *events* rather than a phase of development in which activity consisted solely of affective discharge. And the illusions of omnipotence typical of borderline functioning find a foundation in the normal development of infancy when the infant's experiencing does (subjectively) bring events into existence, and "thought" does bring with it the actuality to which it refers because the infant cannot think beyond the immediate reality.

Finally, the reformulation of narcissism appears compatible with psychoanalytic psychology generally. It rests at its base on notions of developmental differentiation, a model familiar both within and outside psychoanalysis. It suggests the possibility of delineating roots in normal development for such phenomena as illusions of primary creativity and the omnipotence of the wish and opens the door to the investigation of their pathological persistence in the postnarcissistic period when they are no longer validated by the infant's experience. In positing a differentiation model for the transition out of narcissism it offers potentials for exploring the transition from the narcissistic illusion of omnipotence to a differentiated sense of self as center of intention in relation to phenomena independent of self and governed by impersonal forces, from the narcissistic sense of self as center of existence to self as center of thought (imagination, etc.) in relation to a world independent of one's creative powers, from self and other inherent in the undifferentiated event to individuated self in relation to others experienced as independent of self, and from a gender-undifferentiated sense of self to a sex-specific one in relation to persons with other-sex attributes that are not one's own. Beginnings in these directions (Fast, 1984) continue to find no basic incompatibilities between the proposed model and clinical observation.

SUMMARY

The burgeoning of infant research in the last two decades has posed a dilemma for the psychoanalytic conceptualization of narcissism. The perspectives and observations of infancy research emphasize the infant's active and adaptive interaction with the environment from the beginning. They appear to be incompatible with psychoanalytic views of the infant as focused exclusively on its own bodily states, unaware of the external world and active only in affective discharge, not in action to alter reality. One response to this discrepancy has been to suggest that the concept of narcissism be discarded for purposes of understanding infancy.

In the same two decades, however, extensive clinical research, particularly in the area of borderline disorders, has made significant and fruitful use of concepts that depend on the notion of infantile narcissism. To discard the concept, therefore, seems ill-advised.

Instead, a theoretical formulation is proposed that attempts to achieve a reconciliation between the infancy research view of the infant as in adaptive interaction with its environment from the beginning, and the psychoanalytic conception of the infant as narcissistically unaware of an external world and without action aimed at the alteration of reality. It is modeled on Piaget's paradigm for early infant experience. The *event* (the infant grasping the parent's finger, focusing visually on an object, nursing at the breast) is posited to be the basic unit of experience. Analysis of the *event* shows it to be an incident in which the infant is in adaptive interaction with the environment. It is, therefore, fundamentally compatible with infant research. The infant's *understanding* of the event, however, can be shown to have the major characteristics of clinically observed narcissism. The infant is initially unaware that the environment (the finger grasped, the breast at which it nurses) is external to itself. In its understanding, the infant is central: Events come into existence by its experiencing them, are structured by the requirements of the infant's actions, and subside from existence when the experience is over. An initial lack of differentiation of thought from the objects of thought in the experience of events provides a developmental base for the illusion of the omnipotence of the wish, and the character of the infant's centrality is the base for the omnipotent sense of a personal capacity for creating reality. The objectively adaptive interaction with the environment is experienced by the infant as an "enactment," a bringing into being of an event rather than a personal action on an independent environment. From the beginning, modifications occur in the experience of *events*, centrally developments in "objectification" and in the differentiation of thought and its referents. These culminate at about age 2 in a reorganization of experience whose parameters are compatible with both psychoanalytic observations of the transition out of narcissism and Piaget's conception of the transition from the sensorimotor

period to the period of egocentric thought. The child is increasingly capable of symbolic thought (thought in the absence of its referents), recognizes that the environment is external to itself, becomes able to experience its activity as personal action on an independent environment, and begins to experience itself in the context of, and to validate its experience against, a larger reality.

This model is shown to be congruent with established observations of narcissism in the experience of borderline individuals. Their incomplete differentiation from the external world, their sense of their own centrality, their difficulties with instrumental action and the persistence in them of illusions of omnipotence. Finally, the fundamental compatibility of the model with psychoanalytic psychology generally and other possible applications within it are discussed.

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