

The Role of Healthy Narcissism in Relating Emotionally to Familiarity and the Unknown

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Abstract

Narcissism is a greatly maligned human characteristic. It's understandable. Narcissists tend not to consider others' feelings. They think only of themselves, and use those who care for them without giving anything in return. In psychological literature, narcissism is predominantly discussed within a pathological context. The focus is on helping the narcissist see past his own self and learn to relate to others more openly. Within this, the evolutionary need for narcissism tends to be ignored.

In this paper I intend to elaborate on the other side of narcissism that elicits attraction to the familiar and triggers resistance/rejection of the alien or unknown.

What is this function of narcissism? We know that all personality traits, whether they're perceived as healthy or pathological, have an evolutionary basis. They exist in order to ensure our survival as individuals and as a species. So, what about narcissism? What is it that narcissism ensures or preserves? Why do we have this trait, and do we need it?

Keywords: Healthy narcissism; Immune system; Child development; Jointness; parenting; Object relations; Child psychology

Introduction

Embracing the familiar and resisting the unknown

We can all recognise the impulse in both infants and adults to resist the unfamiliar. When confronted with a stranger or a strange situation, it is human nature to run to the familiar. Familiarity is so tempting that whenever we encounter the ones we know and love, we feel the need to smile, hug, kiss and enact other bonding behaviors. Strangeness and the unknown, on the other hand, are unbearable, arousing within us resistance, aggressiveness feelings of threat and even racism.

But familiarity and strangeness are not permanent, or even binary. Someone familiar can become a stranger, and vice versa. We see this in the way that compliments, adoration and approval can make us feel like we know someone, while shaming, rejection or aggression leave us feeling estranged from the ones we love.

The system driving these connections, to my view, is narcissism, which can be thought of as an emotional immune system.

A short background concerning the need for self-protection

Freud [1,2] perceived normal narcissism as "self-love [that] works for the preservation of the individual" [p.102]. Freud [3-5] stressed the mental need for a "protective shield against stimuli," and considered it "an instinct of self-preservation."

Freud's followers offered a variety of offshoots of this need for self-protection, and the literature on this topic supports the notion that our Self needs a psychic protection system. Concepts such as the notion of the "container object" [6]; the "holding mother" [7]; "psychic skin and second skin" [8]; "ego-skin" and "psychic envelopes" [9,10]; and the "protective shell" [11]; are all founded upon the need for the preservation of the Self [12]. We also know the crucial need for regulation of self-esteem [13], maintaining "structural cohesiveness, temporal stability and positive coloring of the self-presentation" [14,15] while seeking to differentiate our self from others [1,16-19]. These concepts (and many others) triggered my idea of inborn and

healthy narcissism as a preserver of a separate self-familiarity and self-continuity and as a defense against alien stimulation - essentially, against otherness [20] which might also be expressed as racism [2,21].

Healthy narcissism is in the service of self-preservation

It is the narcissistic processing that serve as a protective shield or immunization against alien stimuli that might endanger the familiar sense of our Self and its safety [1,12]. Thus, we all have a narcissistic sensitivity to characteristics that emanate from anything that triggers the sense of what is alien or unknown to us [22-24]. Freud describes this sensitivity towards "minor or major differences" [25,26] as the "undisguised antipathies and aversions" [2] p. 102) that people feel toward strangers with whom they must interact. This sensitivity triggers their need "to get rid of the unpleasant awareness" [27] and of the acute mental pain [1,28].

We build a familiar sense of self throughout the accumulation and integration of memory traces from all our experiences, while the constructive and positive memory traces overcome the destructive ones. It includes our own Self, parents, family, friends, and other familiar individuals and groups. That sense of self is protected by narcissistic impulses to reject the strange. It is easy to see the importance of this. If we don't have some suspicion of strange people or situations, we will not be able to survive in what is sometimes a hostile world, as with Daesh today. Hence, the stranger anxiety - at eight months when object constancy is consolidated - can be considered as normal and healthy narcissistic self-immunization [1].

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But the narcissistic processing goes further than accepting or rejecting people and situations. Its function is to protect and restore one's familiar sense of self. Essentially, innate healthy narcissism processes as an emotional immune system which is reminiscent of the biological immune system and works in a very similar way (including autoimmunity symptoms [29]), by attraction to the familiar and resisting of strangeness [12]. Therefore, compliments and affirmation are treated by the narcissistic trait as welcome, while sense of otherness, insults and aggression are triggered by narcissism as injuries and causes us to resist or reject this alien.

While it is important to be open to constructive criticism and recognise that compliments do not indicate the trustworthiness of the giver, narcissism creates a framework in which one can preserve one's self regardless of external input [30], and preserve its familiar self-esteem, self-security and true-self [7].

Healthy narcissism is not only defensive, but also adaptive. It functions this way when it allows the individual to be curious and interested in the unfamiliar and even befriend it, rather than rejecting it out of hand.

Pathological narcissism takes us to extremes

Pathological narcissism differs from healthy narcissism in that it includes destructive memory traces that overcome constructive and positive ones and the narcissism is triggered to preserve this familiar sense of false-self [7], oneness (others are not considered), ideal (or extremely low) self-esteem. It does this even when the input is constructive or will help build relationships or skills. While it exists to protect the individual, it can end up doing immeasurable harm.

However, this does not mean that pathological narcissism should be eliminated entirely. All of us have healthy and pathological narcissism, the question is the balance between healthy/constructive and pathologic/destructive memory traces. The individual with the pathology needs to be guided to work towards a healthy balance. This balance will allow the narcissistic impulse to defend the sense of self, and also allow the person to develop and build healthy relationships.

In practice

I will give a quick example of how healthy narcissism functions in the first period of a child's life.

When George is born, his life completely changes. His new world in no way resembles the one he has experienced in his mother's womb. Spending nine months enclosed within the uterine boundaries, George can recognise himself, suck on his fingers, and hear recurrent sounds originating from the world outside. Specifically, we know nowadays that the developing foetus can hear and recognize his mother's voice, his mother's heartbeat and even music. These auditory experiences leave memory traces which interconnect and form an archaic framework of a sense of familiarity.

At birth, the newborn abruptly loses these boundaries and the amniotic fluid no longer provides a cushion. The newborn experiences every new stimulus as an unfamiliar one, a new assault to the senses. The baby is continually experiencing new sights and sounds - he faces daylight instead of the darkness of the womb. Hence, at this stage in life everything is chaotic. A question arises: How can a newly-born baby deal with this drastic change? How might he preserve his familiar sense of Self or begin to make sense of this new world or to orient himself correctly in order to survive? While an astronaut is instructed for many months on how to succeed in a new world, how to move in an alien

environment, and how to interact with new beings they may encounter, a baby has no formal training. Having been delivered into such a new world, how can he adapt to his new environment?

We may observe that in the moments following birth, a newborn will immediately gravitate and cling (literally) to any object or sensation that allows him to feel the sense of familiarity experienced in the womb. For instance, his mother's heartbeat when she holds him in her arms is a source of comfort, and the swaddling in which he is wrapped may echo the uterine boundaries (and we all like to be covered). This results from the narcissistic self-immunization.

This narcissistic immune system should maintain a balanced alertness toward any strangeness that might threaten the self-familiarity integrity as a whole. This link between healthy narcissism and object relations highlights our narcissistic need to feel the approval of our loved ones, to be loved as we are, and to be known and appreciated for our uniqueness and separateness. It enhances our self-esteem and allows us to remain, each within the boundaries of our own self-familiarity and at the same time maintain love and partnership relations.

Summary

An emotional immune system represents an innate psychic processing - which I refer to as narcissism - for the preservation or immunization of the true and familiar sense of self. This is an innate process from birth onward, that adapts our physical and emotional experiences into a network of the sense of familiar self-esteem, true-self and self-security.

Those experiences which diverge from the familiar, or are in the process of undergoing change, are experienced as a threat to the self, triggered by strangers and otherness.

The sense of familiarity has nothing to do with good or bad memory traces. It reflects only on the constancy, intensity and powerful effects that these memory traces evoke. Some of them are conscious and most of them are unconscious; some of them are constructive, and others are destructive. Often, the destructive memory traces suppress those of a constructive nature due to their sheer powerfulness and they resonate more strongly than the former and then considered as pathological narcissism.

Hence, the innate processing of narcissism may be improved or distorted under the impact of various occurrences in the child's life. Optimal mental health requires the maximization of positive affect and the minimization of negative affect. Along the same lines, healthy narcissistic immunization of the true and familiar self requires the maximization of positive memory traces and the minimization of negative traces.

Finally, it is worth remembering that both children and adults display pathological narcissism. This is why relationships can be easily destroyed under the impact of what is perceived as destructive to the self. This occurs between children and parents, between siblings, between couples, or between friends. Let us remain aware that from birth everyone has a potential innate healthy narcissism. Each has the hidden skill of preserving his/her true and familiar self, to manage a better relation to the unknown and increase tolerance towards the otherness of the partner.

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