NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY IN RELATIONSHIPS: THE EMPTY SELF

AGENDA

Section I Defining the Narcissistic Personality (Distinct from NPD)

Section II Who Pairs with the Narcissist?

Section III The Relational Dance

Section IV The Empty Self

Section V Countertransference with Narcissistic Patients

Section VI Treatment of the Narcissistic Personality

Section VII Working with the “Victims”



SECTION I: DEFINING THE NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY

STRUCTURAL THEORY

- Narcissism as a *structure of self* (not just a trait)
- Central organizing problem: unstable or empty self-experience
- Relational rather than purely diagnostic lens
- Narcissistic Personality is not organized around loving the self too much, but around defending against the collapsing of a fragmented or empty self

NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY VS NPD

NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY (PSYCHODYNAMIC)

- Dependency on self-objects
- Relational exploitation as regulation

- Structural self deficit
- Fragile self-esteem regulation
- Chronic emptiness

NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER

- DSM criteria
- Grandiosity (overt or covert)
- Impairment/distress threshold
- Categorical diagnosis

Reference:

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision



OBJECT RELATIONS CONCEPTUALIZATION

- Pathological grandiose self
- Splitting and idealization/devaluation
- Internalized unresponsive or shaming objects

SELF PSYCHOLOGY CONCEPTUALIZATION

- Arrested development of cohesive self
- Self-object failures
- Chronic need for mirroring, idealizing, twinship

SECTION II:
WHO PAIRS WITH THE NARCISSIST?

Complimentary Defensive Organizations

THE MASOCHISTIC (SELF-DEFEATING) PERSONALITY

1. References:
2. Nancy McWilliams
3. Psychoanalytic Diagnosis

- Love equated with suffering
- Over-giving as attachment strategy
- Hope for transformation of the narcissist

HYSTEROID / BORDERLINE VARIANTS

1. Reference:
2. James F. Masterson

- Fear of abandonment
- Intensity mistaken for intimacy
- Fusion fantasies
- Narcissist offers structure + idealization

WHY THESE PAIRINGS WORK (INITIALLY)

Narcissist receives admiration

Masochist receives purpose

Borderline receives structure

Mutual collusion around disavowed rage

SECTION III:
THE RELATIONAL DANCE

The Over-Giving Masochist

Gives to secure love

Increasing resentment

Unconscious contract: “If I give enough, you will love me.”

NARCISSISTIC FAILURE OF RECIPROCITY

- Others as self-regulatory extensions
- Empathy only when it stabilizes self-esteem
- Emotional extraction rather than exchange

UNCONSCIOUS RAGE

Masochist's rage → depression, somatization, moral superiority

Narcissist's rage → devaluation, contempt, discard

Integration point:

Donald Winnicott (false self compliance vs true self rage)

SECTION IV:
THE EMPTY SELF

Chronic Emptiness

No lasting internalization

Boredom once idealization fades

Compulsive novelty seeking

Repetition compulsion in relationships

CHRONIC EMPTINESS

Object relations language:

Internal bad object cannot be metabolized

Self psychology language:

Failure of transmuting internalizations

EXPLOITATION AND "EMOTIONAL VIOLATION"

- Partners report:
- Feeling consumed
- Emotionally invaded
- Used and discarded
- Psychically disorganized
- Gaslighting and reality distortion
- Sudden Devaluation and Exit

EXPLOITATION AND "EMOTIONAL VIOLATION"

Modern attachment research connection:

Narcissistic traits correlate with exploitative interpersonal strategies and low empathic concern.

SECTION V: COUNTERTRANSFERENCE WITH NARCISSISTIC PATIENTS

Common Countertransference Reactions

Therapists may feel:

Bored

Drained

Inadequate

Idealized → then devalued

Pressured to admire

Enraged

Invisible

1. Reference
2. Glen Gabbard

USING COUNTERTRANSFERENCE

Therapist becomes the frustrated selfobject

Experience of being used mirrors partner experience

Boredom as diagnostic data

Rage as signal of projective processes

Importance of metabolizing rather than retaliating

Integration:

1. Reference
2. Thomas H. Ogden (analytic third / projective identification work)

SECTION VI: TREATMENT OF NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY

Self Psychology Approach

Empathic Immersion

Mirroring interpretations

Optimal frustration

Transmuting internalization

Slow building of cohesive self

1. Reference:
2. The Analysis of the Self

OBJECT RELATIONS / TFP APPROACH

- Clarifying splitting
- Interpreting idealization/devaluation
- Working in the here-and-now
- Confronting aggression safely

MODERNIZED VIA: TRANSFERENCE-FOCUSED PSYCHOTHERAPY RESEARCH

Interpretation of Transference

CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE-BASED EXTENSIONS

- Mentalization-Based Therapy (MBT)
- Schema Therapy for narcissistic traits
- Some support for TFP in severe personality pathology
- Evidence for alliance quality predicting outcome

CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE-BASED EXTENSIONS

Levy et al. (TFP outcome studies)

Kealy & Ogrodniczuk (2011–2020 research on narcissistic pathology)

Dimaggio et al. (metacognition work)

SECTION VII:
WORKING WITH THE "VICTIMS"

What They Present With

Confusion
Self-doubt
Trauma symptoms
Shame
Attachment dysregulation
Obsessive rumination

THEIR CORE NEEDS

- Reality validation
- Restoration of self-trust
- Working through unconscious collusion
- Addressing masochistic structure
- Processing rage safely
- Rebuilding boundaries

REFERENCES

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.; DSM–5–TR). Author.

Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 73*(1), 5–46.

Caligor, E., Levy, K. N., & Yeomans, F. E. (2015). Narcissistic personality disorder: Diagnostic and clinical challenges. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 172*(5), 415–422. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2014.14060723

REFERENCES (CONT'D)

Dimaggio, G., Ottavi, P., Popolo, R., & Salvatore, G. (2019). *Metacognitive interpersonal therapy for personality disorders: A treatment manual*. Routledge.

Gabbard, G. O. (2009). Transference and countertransference: Developments in the treatment of narcissistic personality disorder. *Psychiatric Annals, 39*(3), 129–136.

Gabbard, G. O. (2014). *Psychodynamic psychiatry in clinical practice* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.

Kernberg, O. F. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. Jason Aronson.

Kernberg, O. F. (2016). *Aggressivity, narcissism, and self-destructiveness in the psychotherapeutic relationship: New developments in the psychopathology and psychotherapy of severe personality disorders*. American Psychiatric Publishing.

Kealy, D., & Ogrodniczuk, J. S. (2011). Narcissistic interpersonal problems in clinical practice. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 19*(6), 290–301.

REFERENCES (CONT'D)

Kealy, D., & Ogrodniczuk, J. S. (2018). Pathological narcissism and psychotherapy process. *Psychotherapy, 55*(3), 235–245.

Kohut, H. (1971). *The analysis of the self: A systematic approach to the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personality disorders*. International Universities Press.

Kohut, H. (1977). *The restoration of the self*. International Universities Press.

Levy, K. N., Ellison, W. D., & Reynoso, J. S. (2011). A historical review of narcissism and narcissistic personality. In W. K. Campbell & J. D. Miller (Eds.), *The handbook of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder* (pp. 3–13). Wiley.

Levy, K. N., Meehan, K. B., Kelly, K. M., Reynoso, J. S., Weber, M., Clarkin, J. F., & Kernberg, O. F. (2006). Change in attachment patterns and reflective function in a randomized control trial of transference-focused psychotherapy for borderline personality disorder. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 74*(6), 1027–1040.

REFERENCES (CONT'D)

Masterson, J. F. (1981). *The narcissistic and borderline disorders: An integrated developmental approach*. Brunner/Mazel.

McWilliams, N. (2011). *Psychoanalytic diagnosis: Understanding personality structure in the clinical process* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Ogden, T. H. (1994). The analytic third: Working with intersubjective clinical facts. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 75*, 3–19.

Ronningstam, E. (2016). Pathological narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: Recent research and clinical implications. *Current Behavioral Neuroscience Reports, 3*, 34–42.

Ronningstam, E. (2020). Narcissistic personality disorder: Facing DSM-5 and beyond. *Current Psychiatry Reports, 22*(12), 67.

Winnicott, D. W. (1960). Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In D. W. Winnicott (1965), *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment* (pp. 140–152). International Universities Press.

Yeomans, F. E., Clarkin, J. F., & Kernberg, O. F. (2015). *Transference-focused psychotherapy for borderline personality disorder: A clinical guide* (2nd ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.

THANK YOU

Guy Balice, Ph.D.

213-615-7254

gbalice@thechicagoschool.eduu