

Characteristics of Narcissistic Rage

(A Kohutian Perspective)

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for a degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Human Relations Institute

Psychoanalytic-Based Psychotherapy (Cp 711)

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Spring, 1988

Self-Psychology distinguishes self-objects from objects in that, "objects are valued for who they are; self-objects are valued for the internal functions and the emotional stability they provide" (Baker, H. 1985, p. 2). Self psychology, according to Kohut, has as its basic tenet the notion that every individual needs a surrounding environment of empathic self-objects throughout their life span for survival. This is a constant need over time which changes in its intensity and frequency depending on one's developmental stage and the conditions existing in their external environment. However, it is inevitable that there will be a disruption in these sustaining self-object relationships. It is in the responses of the narcissistically vulnerable individual to these disruptions that a narcissistic rage can occur. This paper will begin to discuss some of the conditions that surround these responses.

Narcissistic rage manifests on a continuum ranging from mild annoyance to an intense furor. It occurs when there is failure or disappointment regarding one's "infantile grandiose expectations" of a self-object. It is provoked when the injured party experiences some narcissistic injury to self-esteem such as contempt, ridicule, or conspicuous defeat. It manifests in a climate of outrage and humiliation resulting in a regression to more primitive interactions with the self-object. And it is characterized by a thirst for revenge; a persistent attempt to destroy the self-object.

Meyer Gunther outlines four specific qualities which usually accompany narcissistic rage: → *This would be the result of early failure. This reaction needs to be appreciated in the developmental context in which it occurs.*

- (1) an expectation of absolute control over the object's behavior.
  - (2) an expectation of perfection of response from the object.
  - (3) an utter incapacity for empathy with the object.
  - (4) an incapacity to distinguish the issue or problem from the object as a separate entity.
- (Gunter, 1980, p. 9)

Kohut tells us that the wish for revenge for a narcissistic injury is boundless, with no empathy for the offender, and with no awareness of his separateness. The rage that emerges is out of a need to insist on total perfection of the self. "He (Kohut) characterizes this rage as a reaction to the frustration of the omnipotence of the grandiose self" (Terman, 1985, P. 241). This frustration occurs when one's power over the self-object diminishes and it seems to supply the idealized opportunity with which to merge. This occurs when the idealized self-object is either not available or if it is in some way deficient. This frustration and resulting rage also occurs when the self-object no longer confirms one's expectations of the acceptance of the perfection <sup>of</sup> the self. In other words if the mirror does not provide the expected confirmation all attempts are made to smash it.

This need for revenge...the righting of a wrong...the attempt to undo an injury by whatever necessary means stems from a "deeply anchored,

*I think it acts as more than a mirror here - it has a validating, confirming quality from the idealized side of the bipolar field.*

unrelenting compulsion...which gives no rest to the those who have suffered a narcissistic injury" (Kohut, 1972, p.380).

Kohut tells us that, "narcissistic rage arises when self or object fail to live up to the absolutarian expectations which are directed at their function" (Kohut, 1972, p. 386). He goes on to say that this occurs when

the child who, more or less phase-appropriately, insists on the grandiosity and omnipotence of the self and the self-object or (when) the narcissistically fixated adult whose archaic narcissistic structures have remained unmodified because they became isolated from the rest of the growing psyche after the phase-appropriate, narcissistic demands of childhood had been traumatically frustrated. (p. 386)

The survival of this archaic environment is the issue at hand and it

depends on the approving mirroring function of the self-object as well as the promise of the opportunity to merge with an "idealized one". The intense shame and the most violent forms of rage seems to be in direct proportion to the need of the individual to maintain absolute control over the self-object for maintenance of self-esteem and in some cases the survival of the self.

Please note  
the  
difference  
in Kohut's  
theory  
between  
mirroring  
& idealizing

Jim -  
An excellent report!  
This narcissistic injury comes at  
a crucial time when the self & self  
object are caught up in a symbiotic  
idealized relationship. The baby idealizes the  
object & merges with it for safety & security. The  
narcissistic injury occurs when that bond is  
not solid & thus the baby is not confirmed  
as part of the symbiotic union.  
(30)

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