

Humanizing the Narcissistic Style

STEPHEN M. JOHNSON, Ph.D.



W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • *NEW YORK • LONDON*

INTRODUCTION

SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS are narcissists. Much of my most successful and moving therapeutic work has been done with individuals who can most accurately be understood by using the concepts of narcissism. But most of these friends and clients are not most readily recognized by their self-involvement, grandiosity, pride, entitlement, manipulativeness, etc., though these usually well-hidden features of their personalities certainly do exist. They are not those very disagreeable, self-centered, often noncontributing rip-off artists who come to mind when one thinks of the narcissistic character disorder. In the main, these people contribute a good deal to their fellow human beings, but they pay dearly in pain and aliveness for their driven achievements. They are too busy proving their worth—or more properly, disproving their worthlessness—to *feel* the love, appreciation, and joy of human connectedness which their good works could potentially stimulate in themselves and others. These people are not character disordered. They are people tortured by narcissistic injury and crippled by developmental arrests in functioning which rob them of the richness of life they deserve. They are good people, contributing people who are hurting—and often very badly. They are living and suffering the *narcissistic style*.

This form of narcissism is part and parcel of our life-denying culture, which places accomplishment over pleasure, status over love, appearance over reality. It is the endemic result of our culture's material perfectionism. It bridles a very significant proportion of our people and cripples some of our most gifted and giving individuals. Yet while the culture reinforces it, its breeding ground is the family. Though Madison Avenue plays on its existence and fosters its development, its roots are much deeper.

Individuals suffering from the narcissistic style can be profoundly

helped by those who truly understand the underlying psychic structure of narcissism and who possess the human and technical skills to transform it. With psychological treatment which is able to meet them where they truly are and give them what they truly need, they can be brought to the experience of a real, emotionally connected life in which their contributions to the rest of us are, if anything, strengthened. That is not pedagogical psychoanalysis or short-term behavioral or cognitive modification or superficial scream therapy. Rather, it is a therapy informed by the deepest insights of psychoanalytic theory and practice and incorporating active as well as receptive techniques. These serve to help the individual both move beyond arrested development and work through emotional injury.

In a good deal of the literature, the narcissistic character disorder, as well as the narcissistic style, has been given a bum rap. Largely, the focus has been on those very disagreeable characteristics of the narcissistically disordered person rather than on the nature of his injury, the phenomenology of his pain, and the fragility of his self. A focus on these more phenomenological aspects of the narcissistic experience will promote far more empathy and understanding, an attitude which must be the touchstone of our therapeutic approach to all narcissistic persons. In this book, I will contrast the narcissistic character disorder with the narcissistic style, focusing on the similarities and differences along this *continuum* of ego functioning and describing the essential elements of the appropriate treatment for each.

I offer here an integrated psychoanalytic developmental theory which provides the underpinning for a synthesis of therapeutic techniques to be used with the character disorders and character styles. In the first book of this series, *Characterological Transformation: The Hard Work Miracle*, I presented this formulation for the psychological problems deriving primarily from difficulties in human bonding and attachment. The present volume deals primarily with disorders in individuation and the formation of self—the failure of normal narcissism which leads to a painful life of pathological narcissism.

In this integrated model, the presenting psychopathology is understood by appreciating the nature of the injury on the one hand and the nature of the arrest in the development of ego and self on the other. The nature of the injury is best elucidated by more traditional analytic understandings, particularly those offered by character and defense analysis. The understanding of the developmental arrest comes best from psychoanalytic developmental psychology, which I

use here as an umbrella label for object relations, self, and ego psychology. This unified psychoanalytic theory then provides the groundwork for an integrated treatment approach which seeks to heal the emotional injury and work through to the maturation of the arrested ego.

Healing the original injury, particularly in its central pathological affects, often requires the use of treatment procedures which emphasize accessing and expressing these archaic and often catastrophic feelings. Such techniques range from calm genetic psychoanalytic interpretations to the more active and often engaging interventions of Gestalt and bioenergetic therapy. By contrast, therapeutic procedures aimed at remedying the arrested development of ego or self more often rely on explanation, reconstruction, and other supportive, cognitive, and behavioral interventions, which, while they may certainly access feelings and produce frustration, do not rely on unusual or active methods to deliberately do so.

It is my position that developmental psychoanalytic psychology and character analytic approaches need to be *informed* by one another. Each approach risks an overemphasis on one side of the etiological-treatment picture. The perspectives of the developmental model can lead to an overemphasis on explanatory, interpretive, and supportive interventions, neglecting the crucial role of the awareness and expression of primitive affects. But the more affective therapies can err in the direction of overemphasizing the importance of primitive emotional experience without a full understanding of ego and self development, thereby missing what is not so much psychological defense as *self*-preserving strategies necessary to functioning. Finally, both of these psychoanalytic approaches can be greatly enhanced when informed by the nondepth psychology strategies which come from the cognitive therapies, behavior modification, family and systems therapy, strategic therapy, neurolinguistic programming, transactional analysis, Gestalt therapy, and others. What I am advocating here is not a hodge-podge eclecticism. Rather, this is an integrated developmental theory and a synthesis of treatment approaches aimed at psychological deficit and conflict resolution.

The integration provided in this book is really at three levels. First, it represents an integration of developmental psychoanalytic psychology. This is the synthesis of ego psychology, object relations, and self psychology. This first integration is the easiest because these three schools share many similarities differing mainly in their point of

emphasis. At this first level, however, I hope to make a contribution by disseminating what I view as incredibly important material which is very often inaccessible to anyone but the most analytically sophisticated reader. In both this work and *Characterological Transformation*, I have endeavored to translate as well as integrate the insights of developmental psychoanalytic psychology for those who might not otherwise be exposed to this rich body of knowledge.

The second level of integration maintains a psychoanalytic base but incorporates the insights of character and defense analysis within the more elaborate developmental structure provided by psychoanalytic developmental psychology. Here I hope to particularly serve those who have taught me so much in the area of character analysis and bioenergetic therapy by integrating this important body of knowledge within the larger theoretical context in which it really belongs. Reichian and bioenergetic therapies really do not need to be fringe movements seen by traditional therapists of nearly all other persuasions as just one more “flaky” fad of a libertine culture. Rather, character analysis is a branch of psychoanalysis incorporating energetic armoring as a part of classic defense analysis—a central element of traditional psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, without this arm of analysis, the contemporary emphasis on developmental theory pulls inexorably for a greater concentration on theoretical and cognitive understanding of psychopathology at the expense of the critical role of primitive affect in determining psychopathology and in effecting its cure. Many of us in the highly educated mental health professions tend to gravitate, almost automatically, to theoretical understandings and cognitive (i.e., insight and explanation) interventions, for they are safer than exploring the dark cauldrons of primitive emotion. Even when we acknowledge the critical roles of sex, aggression, grief, terror, etc., it is easier to talk *about* these feelings than to jump in among them.

I hope that the affective therapies (e.g., Reichian, bioenergetic, Gestalt, rebirthing, etc.) will persist through conservative times because they are essential for keeping us in the true human drama that psychotherapy is largely about. These therapies are often necessary for the very reasons they are resisted. The restrictive, emotion-denying, life-fearing aspects of our dominant Judeo-Christian culture create the very pathologies that these affective therapies are designed to remedy. They have been popular in the expansive, experimental, and

questioning periods of the past. Now they have lost some of that popularity as the more reasonable and conservative forces in our society have become more dominant. Our culture is trendy. But the science that is psychotherapy must transcend trends and continue to provide a model for human growth which is both reasonable and yet truly human. In this work, then, I hope to integrate, legitimize, and contribute to the repopularization of these affective or expressive therapies. This process is easiest with Reichian and bioenergetic therapy because the underlying theory of character structure is so substantive and compatible with the new psychoanalysis.

The third level of integration involves the synthesis of various therapeutic techniques under this developmental-characterological umbrella, so that an eclectic treatment approach may be pursued with the guidance of a unified theory. I have endeavored here to exemplify the utility of this approach—first with a detailed practical description of the conflict and deficit problems of narcissism, and second with a theoretically consistent set of therapeutic procedures which may be applied to heal it. In this third level of integration—psychotherapy technique—I am also attempting to apply rich psychoanalytic concepts to the more common once-a-week therapeutic hour. When the patient is seen only weekly, the transference within therapy may be less pervasive, but the transference outside therapy may be differentially more important. Additionally, where therapy is less frequent and problems of character style are involved, active therapeutic techniques are often more appropriate, as the problem in these cases is more in accessing and expressing primitive emotions than in containing them.

In the developmental model presented here, characterological adaptations represent archetypal manifestations of core human issues. For narcissism, these archetypal issues are formed in that crucible created when the infant begins to become an individual, more autonomous and self-willed than the more passive and dependent suckling. As this individuation process unfolds, the child requires more freedom, more support for the development of autonomous functions, greater permission to experience and react to the frustrations of life, but with appropriate limits attuned to his developmental level. In some ways, this is the most difficult time for one to be a good enough parent in that there are inevitable conflicts, both within the child and with the surrounding environment. Perhaps the most difficult polari-

ties of human existence are first encountered at this time and, as a consequence, some of the most universal of human dilemmas are often left chronically unresolved.

The *rapprochement with reality* is a most basic task of human life first encountered in that subphase of individuation which Mahler (1972) has called *rapprochement*. Though initially this label was used primarily to highlight the child's reemerging need to reconnect with the mother after his striking independence in the prior *practicing* subphase of development, the label has taken on a far more profound and enduring meaning for me. The *rapprochement* first called for by a mere 18-month-old child is really with some central realities of existence, including unity versus separation, dependence versus independence, grandiosity versus vulnerability, the desire to control versus the need to be controlled, limitlessness versus realistic limitations, etc. Many adults are still having temper tantrums, delusions, depressions, debilitating anxieties, perfectionistic obsessions and compulsions, and other painful adaptations to the failure to realize this *rapprochement with reality*. Due to developmental arrest during this subphase of individuation, many of us are still dealing with these dilemmas with quite limited and primitive ego functioning.

Most individuals who suffer such difficulties typically have little if any understanding of what they are really dealing with as they begin psychotherapy. And they often possess little if any awareness of the ways in which parental or other environmental figures made this *rapprochement* difficult or impossible. The emotions of the unresolved *rapprochement* were usually too painful to sustain, but they provided the powerful underlying motivation for a characterological adaptation *frozen* at a time of limited affective, behavioral, and cognitive resources. Through denying the realities of the self, the family, and the very instinctual needs of the organism itself, this characterological adaptation has typically been supported, at least in great measure, by the child's family or its substitute. Driven by the unremitting force of painful emotion and supported by the surrounding environment, the characterological adaptation became securely fixed. The emerging real self literally did not have a chance.

The synthesis of characterological, object relations, ego, and self psychology provides the best available map for current understanding of this common human tragedy. The task of contemporary psycho-

therapy is to develop from this understanding an environment in which the real self may be reclaimed and the rapprochement with reality achieved.

One central position set forth in these volumes is that achieving these goals requires an integration of therapeutic techniques so as to accomplish the building of ego resources, the phenomenology of a solid self, and the resolution of intrapsychic core emotional conflicts as required by classical psychoanalysis. This integrative, broad-spectrum approach to psychotherapy requires maximum flexibility in therapeutic technique. It demands that the therapist be comfortable with the most active of interventions characteristic of bioenergetic analysis, behavior modification, or neurolinguistic programming, on the one hand, and equally adept at the most receptive silence of psychoanalysis, which respects the necessarily creative process of self-discovery, on the other.

This approach integrates what, in *Characterological Transformation*, I refer to as the *conflict model* of human pathology suggested by traditional psychoanalytic theory with the *deficit model* contributed by the understandings of ego psychology, object relations, and self psychology. This integration allows one to consistently employ ego building techniques from cognitive and behavioral approaches on the one hand and conflict resolution techniques from psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy, and bioenergetics on the other. This volume delineates the possible applications of this mixed model to the narcissistic character structure, which develops out of failures both in individuation and in the necessary rapprochement with reality.

In Chapter I, I have briefly sketched the entire developmental-characterological model, providing a unified theory to inform therapeutic intervention with the character disorders and character styles. Though this book is devoted to narcissism, at least some basic understanding of the whole model is necessary for effective therapeutic operation in any specific case. This is so, in part, because *pure* narcissism, unaffected by other characterological issues, is extremely rare, if it exists at all. So, it is essential in any given case to be aware of the other interactive characterological issues which surround the narcissistic expression. In a sense, all characterological adaptations are narcissistic, in that they are defensive compensations to early injury. Understanding each of the basic types of injury and the characterological adaptations which they typically create is necessary for differen-

tial diagnosis and treatment. In addition, this overall developmental view assists the therapist in determining the individual's resources, as well as his deficits. To do psychotherapy from the point of view of psychoanalytic developmental psychopathology, it is necessary to operate from an understanding of the entire developmental-characterological model.

In this first chapter, as in all that follows, I have relied more heavily than in my prior work on the insights of Heinz Kohut. Kohut's perspective is particularly useful when approaching the phenomenological understanding of the development of self—so critical in understanding narcissism. In addition, this more internal, phenomenological approach assists us in understanding the experience of the narcissistic client and helps us humanize our approach to him.

In Chapter II, I describe the narcissistic character structure. As in *Characterological Transformation*, the narcissistic conditions are discussed employing the following outline:

- Etiology
- Affect, behavior, cognition
- Energetic expression
- Therapeutic objectives
- Therapeutic techniques

Thus, in Chapter II, the archetypal etiological picture derived from character analysis, object relations, ego, and self psychology is presented in detail. This is followed by a description of the archetypal presentation of character as demonstrated in the individual's apparent and latent affect, characteristic behaviors, and characteristic attitudes, beliefs, and defenses. Following this, the insights of the bioenergetic therapists are used in a discussion of the energetic armoring characteristic of narcissism. Following this description, an outline of therapeutic objectives is offered. Finally, the greater substance of the book is devoted to the psychotherapy appropriate to narcissism.

Relative to *Characterological Transformation*, however, this book is less a basic text; it assumes more practical knowledge of psychotherapy and is less explicitly technique oriented. Here I present models of human pathology and formulas for therapeutic technique. However, I want you to know that I know that these models and formulas are only that—maps of the territory to be understood, not

the territory itself. While they may guide the largely improvisational interaction of psychotherapy, they fail to fully capture the essentially artistic form that is the therapeutic process. It is my intent to free up, rather than to constrain, our understanding and practice of psychotherapy, so that more and more we are limited only by the reality of what our clients can use and less and less by the inherent constraints of our models.

The material on treatment technique is organized around the triadic presentation of self shown by the narcissistic person. Chapter III discusses therapeutic responses to the *symptomatic self*, which includes depressive, somatic, and cognitively disordered symptomatology. Chapter IV is devoted to treating the mobilization of the narcissistic defenses—the false self. Chapter V elucidates the treatment of the emotions and demands of the archaic *real* self functioning in the maturing patient.

Chapters VI and VII illustrate, through transcripts of recorded sessions, the group and individual therapy of narcissistic patients. These extended case reports present an integration of group and individual treatment modalities in two cases—one exemplifying the narcissistic style and the other the narcissistic character disorder. For me, this is the richest part of the book because it gives a moment-to-moment account of a dramatic process that otherwise can only be conceptualized. Further, the chapters are largely written by those people I mentioned at the outset—my *narcissistic* clients who have given to one another and to me so freely, who have shared their pain so openly, and who in that process have found their long-lost selves.

Chapter VIII addresses the issue of transformation. I now know that the transformation of narcissism is possible through a usually long and often painful process of psychotherapy employing the mixed model of conflict resolution and deficit repair. Is this possible with less pain and in less time? Or is the promise of that simply the narcissistically motivated, self-serving delusion of a few con artists? These are good questions better considered at the close of the work you will be doing by engaging, not just reading, this book.