

CONFERR Seminar series



The Pain of Narcissism and its Psychotherapeutic Treatment

Susanna Abse
Dr Lucy Goodison
Sue Cowan-Jenssen
Dr Diana Diamond
Dr Jeremy Holmes
Dr Phil Mollon
Jenny Riddell
Dr John Steiner
Neville Symington

Monday evenings
Autumn 2007
London



Introduction

The fact that the concept of narcissism has been so widely embraced within mainstream culture suggests that it illuminates a set of personal characteristics that require comprehension: grandiosity, arrogance, omnipotent tendencies, the inability to see the needs or perspective of another, a strong sense of entitlement, belief in the right to be gratified, a tendency to be easily offended, the incapacity to bear the assault of reality on a fragile sense of personal perfection, lack of empathy for others and, possibly, a hungry need to be seen and admired.

What is less obvious within the cultural critique is the profound need that underpins this apparently paradoxical psychological structure. While giving us a helpful handle for understanding an interpersonal dynamic, the mainstream use of the term does not elucidate the pain that has required an individual to adopt a narcissistic solution.

Since Freud wrote and revised his theories of narcissism in the early 1900s, psychoanalytic thinkers have been continually adjusting their understanding of this tendency, and how narcissistic people can be helped to establish sustainable relationships with others. The resulting thinking is illuminating, but complicated and contradictory, leaving us with interesting questions: Do we think that the psychological structure of narcissism is primarily a defence, compensation or flight? What is its aetiology? How are we to distinguish between healthy narcissism, based on an implicit trust in reciprocal love that enables the ego to flourish creatively and generously in the world, and pathological narcissism, in which the individual has learnt to invest in a distorted aggrandisement of the self?

This series has been designed to tease out some of the theoretical and clinical issues in working with narcissistic disorders in order to support psychotherapists in their understanding and clinical skill. We will consider whether psychotherapy can be really successful in resolving narcissistic symptoms and defences and, if so, what approaches are shown to be most effective.

We have been able to bring together an exceptional group of speakers, who will explore answers to these and other questions. Please join us with your own thoughts about the narcissistic personality structure from your own psychotherapeutic experience.

Programme

Monday September 24 2007

Neville Symington

Narcissism: A New Theory

In this talk Neville Symington will outline the core elements of his theory of narcissism as he elaborated it in his books *Narcissism: A New Theory* and *Emotion and Spirit* which were published in the early nineties. In these two books he gives the classical definition of narcissism and then looks at this from a different angle: what sort of choice is being refused if the individual's own self is being taken as love object? He will then demonstrate how his understanding then matured and received its expression in his book *A Pattern of Madness* which was published ten years after the previous two. It would be helpful if participants could read the following three books: *Narcissism: A New Theory* (Karnac 1993), *Emotion and Spirit* (Karnac 1994), *A Pattern of Madness* (Karnac 2002).

Monday October 1 2007

Dr Jeremy Holmes

Narcissism: Five Stories

The theoretical part of this presentation is based on five varying accounts of narcissism from Ovid, Wilde, Shakespeare, Buddhism, and psychoanalysis. Dr Holmes will then discuss some of the clinical dilemmas raised by working with people for whom narcissism is a salient issue, including the fact that psychoanalytic therapy with such people may, at least initially, make things worse rather than better. Possible resolutions will also be considered. This presentation will include live supervision with volunteers from the audience who may wish to work on a case involving narcissism.

Monday October 8 2007

Dr Phil Mollon

Narcissism is an investment in the False Self. The 'True' Self is the Unknown Other Within

Pathological narcissism may be viewed as involving an excessive investment in a particular image of the self. Typically, in common forms of narcissism, the person has grown up identifying with the image in the mother's mind. There may have been an attempt to be the mother's perfect son or daughter, conflicting with a simultaneously present, but split-off (vertical split) repressed 'true' self (the model implicit in Kohut's writings). It can be important to recognise what is implicit in Lacan, that all human selves are 'false selves' - all are constructed out of the available images, words, and roles within the particular culture the child is born into. Human society is riddled with conflicts driven by efforts to sustain these illusions of identity. Psychotherapeutic work can endeavour to help the narcissistically imprisoned person become freer to access their deeper spontaneous strivings and initiatives. The 'true' self is always unknown since it is forever evolving. This evening will include some experiential, skills-orientated work with the audience.

Monday October 15 2007

Jenny Riddell and Susanna Abse

Echo and Narcissus – a Type of Couple Relating.

Using the relationship between Echo and Narcissus as a starting point and, using clinical vignettes from their own practices, this presentation will explore how narcissistic states of mind, both fleeting and fixed, present in couples. Exploring the continuum between ruthless self-interest, necessary self-protection and mature couple-relating, they will examine the challenge therapists face in holding to a "couple state of mind" in their work, whether with individuals, couples or families.

October 22 and 29 Half Term

Monday November 5 2007

Dr Diana Diamond

Attachments to Internal Objects in Narcissistic Patients

John Bowlby hypothesised that attachment theory and research would contribute to our understanding and treatment of disorders of the self, particularly borderline and narcissistic disorders. Yet the linkages between attachment and narcissistic disorders remain relatively unexplored. A number of empirical studies have linked people with narcissistic disorders to dismissing internal working models of attachment. Behind the dismissing stance of such patients is a defensive retreat from the fragmented state of self into a pathological, false grandiose self, characterised by the denial of dependency and a retreat to imagined omnipotence. This paper will explore the relationship between internal working models of attachment and internal object relationships in patients with different configurations of pathological narcissism.

Monday November 12 2007

Sue Cowan-Jensen and Dr Lucy Goodison

Narcissism: Fragile Bodies in a Fragile World

This talk will explore how the intensified consumer culture of our time, playing on feelings of shame and uncertainty by fuelling the illusion of invulnerability to physical and emotional needs, can be seen as reactivating the 'narcissistic wound'. Using material from their practices and from public life, the speakers will seek to identify the cost - collective and individual - of maintaining the resulting disassociation through a range of addictive behaviours that can permeate work, relationships and the therapeutic process. How can the concept of narcissism in our media age help us to understand phenomena such as the rise of fundamentalism, the cult of celebrity, body-modification and growing dependency on drugs and alcohol? How do the fantasy of self-sufficiency, the disavowal of loss, the aspiration to agelessness and the denial of the non-discursive reality of death affect our ability to respond appropriately to human injustice and the fragility of the planet?

Monday November 19 2007

Dr John Steiner

Improvement, Shame and Embarrassment in Narcissistic Patients.

In this paper Dr Steiner will describe the role which shame and humiliation played in the maintenance of a psychic retreat in a particular narcissistic patient. Emerging from psychic retreat to face his objects more openly meant that this patient was able to observe his objects and also to be observed by them. Seeing and being seen, however, raised the problems of envying and being envied. For long periods the patient feared that he would be humiliated by an envious destructive object and had to return to the protection of the psychic retreat. An understanding of the role of humiliation may help us to support our patients to recognise and tolerate being observed and to gradually face their objects and themselves more fully.

Speakers

Susanna Abse

Susanna Abse is a couple psychoanalytic psychotherapist and Director of the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR). Before training as a psychotherapist, she worked in off-site units with challenging adolescents and as an arts administrator. She is a full member and past vice chair of the Society of Couple Psychoanalytic Psychotherapists and was programme leader at TCCR for the MA in the psychoanalytic study of the couple relationship. Her 2006 paper was *When a Problem Shared is a Problem... Whose Illness is it Anyway? Questions of technique when working with the borderline couple.*

Dr Lucy Goodison

Lucy Goodison has over twenty-five years' experience of working with therapeutic massage, and is a dance movement therapist teaching in adult education including, until recently, in Holloway Prison. She lectures internationally in the field of Bronze Age archaeology, and on the iconography and physical rituals of Minoan religion. These two strands of activity inform her writing, which ranges from academic papers and the monograph *Death, Women and the Sun: Symbolism of Regeneration in the Early Aegean* to books linking symbolic, somatic and social issues for the lay reader, including *Moving Heaven and Earth: Sexuality, Spirituality and Social Change*, *The Dreams of Women: Exploring and Interpreting Women's Dreams*, and (ed. with Christine Morris) *Ancient Goddesses: the Myths and the Evidence.*

Speakers cont...

Sue Cowan-Jensen

Susan Cowan-Jensen is a London-based psychotherapist and a founder member of the London Association of Primal Psychotherapists. She works part-time for the Trauma Unit of Watford General Hospital. She has over twenty years' experience of working with individuals and groups both here in the UK and in Scandinavia and elsewhere in mainland Europe. She has written articles for journals and books and was a regular contributor to the website allaboutpsychotherapy.com. She currently writes for the website of *Psychologies* magazine. Her writing covers a wide range of issues, from how psychotherapy works to mortality and loss, and understanding the impact of our celebrity culture. She has a specialised training in working with post-traumatic stress.

Dr Diana Diamond

Diana Diamond PhD is Associate Professor in the doctoral program in clinical psychology at the City University of New York, and Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the Weill Medical Center of Cornell University, where she is also a senior fellow at the Personality Disorders Institute (PDI). She has co-authored several books, including *Affect and Attachment in the Family* and *Borderline Patients: Extending the Limits of Treatability*, as well as a number of articles in the areas of attachment theory and research, personality disorders, mental representation, social and cultural aspects of narcissistic disorders, sex and gender, and film and psychoanalysis. She is on the editorial board of *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* and has edited (with Sidney Blatt and Joseph Lichtenberg) a three-volume monograph series on attachment theory and research and its implications for psychoanalytic theory and practice. With her colleagues at the PDI, she has conducted research on change in attachment status and mentalisation in borderline patients in psychodynamic therapy.

Dr Jeremy Holmes

Dr Jeremy Holmes is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, former member of the Guild of Psychotherapists, and a member of the Severnside Institute for Psychotherapy. He was formerly a consultant psychiatrist and senior lecturer in psychiatry at University College London (1977-1986), a consultant psychiatrist in psychotherapy in the West of England (1986- 2003), and an honorary senior clinical research fellow at the Peninsula Medical School. Until recently he co-ran a community-based personality disorder service in North and mid Devon. He is now in private psychoanalytic psychotherapy practice and co-leads the psychodynamic stream of the MSc in psychological therapies at the University of Exeter. He is author or co-author of over 100 papers and book chapters, and 14 books in the field of psychotherapy and attachment theory, most recently, *The Search for the Secure Base: Attachment Theory and Psychotherapy* (Routledge 2001), *Integration in Psychotherapy: Models and Methods* (edited with A. Bateman, Oxford University Press 2002), and *The Oxford Textbook of Psychotherapy* (edited with G. Gabbard & J. Beck, Oxford, 2005).

Dr Phil Mollon

Phil Mollon PhD is a psychoanalyst and member of the Independent Group within the British Psychoanalytical Society. He is also a psychotherapist (Tavistock Society) and clinical psychologist. His PhD thesis concerned narcissism and disturbances in the experience of self. This study gave rise to his first book, *The Fragile Self: The Structure of Narcissistic Disturbance and Its Therapy* (1995). Subsequently he has written extensively on the impact of trauma on the sense of self, including the development of dissociative states of mind. Mollon was one of the first psychotherapists in this country to highlight the importance of shame in mental life, an affect that has often been eclipsed by the emphasis on guilt. More recently he has explored, from a psychoanalytic perspective, adjunctive approaches including eye movement desensitising and reprocessing (EMDR) and energy psychology methods. He is the author of 13 books including *Releasing the Self: The Healing Legacy of Heinz Kohut* (2001). His most recent book is *EMDR and the Energy Therapies* (2004).

Jenny Riddell

Jenny Riddell is an attachment-based psychoanalytic psychotherapist registered with the Centre for Attachment-based Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy (CAPP). She is course leader for the Relate post-graduate diploma and MA in couple therapy and supervises and teaches on several psychotherapy programmes. She also has a private practice in London.

John Steiner

Dr John Steiner is a training analyst of the British Psychoanalytical Society and works in private practice as a psychoanalyst. He is the author of several psychoanalytic papers and the book *Psychic Retreats: Pathological Organisations in Psychotic, Neurotic and Borderline Patients* (Routledge, 1993).

Neville Symington

Neville Symington is a psycho-analyst in private practice with his wife (who is also a psycho-analyst) in Sydney, Australia. As a young man he studied philosophy theology, and clinical psychology. He did his psycho-analytic training in London and is a Fellow of the British Psycho-Analytical Society. He held a senior staff position in the Adult Department of the Tavistock Clinic from 1977-85. In 1986 he migrated to Sydney, Australia where he was Chairman of the Sydney Institute for Psycho-Analysis from 1987-93 and President of the Australian Psycho-Analytic Society from 1999-2002. He is the author of *The Analytic Experience* (Free Association Press and St. Martins Press), *Emotion and Spirit* (Cassell and Karnac Books), *Narcissism: A New Theory*, *The Making of a Psychotherapist*, *The Spirit of Sanity*, *A Pattern of Madness*, *How to Choose a Psychotherapist*, *The Blind Man Sees* and *A Healing Conversation* which are all published by Karnac Books. He is joint-author with Joan Symington of *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion* published by Routledge. He lectures internationally and has a website at: www.nevillesymington.com

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- November 5** Dr Diana Diamond
- November 12** Sue Cowan-Jenssen and Dr Lucy Goodison
- November 19** Dr John Steiner

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Registration 6.45 pm - 7.15 pm

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