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The Narcissistic Character

Rainer Funk

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A social character formation that has become more prominent in recent decades is the narcissistic character, both as an individual character (a classic example would be the personality of Donald Trump), as well as a socially accepted and supported narcissism among the broader population, in other words as a social character of a group.

According to Erich Fromm

»narcissism is an orientation in which all one's interest and passion are directed to one's own person: one's body, mind, feelings, interests, and so forth. [...] For the narcissistic person, only he and what concerns him are fully real; what is outside, what concerns others, is real only in a superficial sense of perception; that is to say, it is real for one's senses and for one's intellect. But it is not real in a deeper sense, for one's feeling or understanding. He is, in fact, aware only of what is outside, inasmuch as it affects him. Hence, he has no love, no compassion, no rational, objective judgment. The narcissistic person has built an invisible wall around himself. He is everything, the world is nothing. Or rather: He is the world.« (Fromm 1989a [1974–75], p. 117.)

The social acceptability of the narcissistic social character formation, along with an overemphasis on the individual, also appears to have led to narcissism being primarily understood as something completely normal. Even the professional literature posits that everyone needs a healthy sense of narcissism, even for biological reasons of survival. The argument continues, however, that this normal narcissism can become pathological, a disordered narcissism.



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1. Relatedness to oneself and narcissism

In order to avoid any definitional misunderstandings in the following remarks about Fromm's understanding of narcissism, I would like to point to the distinctions and differentiations that he made: Fromm's social-psychoanalytic approach implies that every person must necessarily be self-related. This relatedness to oneself, however, has nothing to do with narcissism. As with relatedness to other people, a relatedness to oneself can be satisfied in various ways: solicitously, negligently, harshly, mercilessly, lovingly, with interest, etc. Here everything is possible, but not every way of satisfying the need for a sense of identity encourages the psychic capacity for growth and allows man to thrive.

By the end of the 1930s, Fromm had already developed a psychology of the self and had posed the question about how a selfish or narcissistic way of relating to oneself can develop (Fromm 1939b). In the following years, he made a clear distinction between »self-love" and »self-interest" on the one hand, and »selfishness" on the other (Fromm 1947a, pp. 119–140). This distinction forms the basis of the psychological insight that »the selfish person does not love himself too much but too little" (Fromm 1956a, p. 60). Fromm then expounded upon his insights on individual and social narcissism in *The Heart of Man* (1964a, pp. 62–94).

In contrast to what much of the psychoanalytic literature claims, for Fromm there is no normal or biological narcissism. Nor does it make any sense to speak, as Freud did, of a »primary narcissism« of the infant and toddler; but there is a growing capacity for love of and interest in the self. The dependency of the infant and toddler on an unconditionally loving, protective, nourishing, attentive, empathically mentalizing and mirroring caregiver has nothing to do with the needy child's narcissism and self-centeredness. (The fact that an infant can neither stand nor walk for a long time does not make him crippled in our eyes. Why, then, should we see an infant as a narcissist?)

The development of self-love and self-interest is part of a lengthy educational process in which – psychologically speaking – internalized representations of experiences of reality and other people (object experiences) begin to emerge. Depending on what sort of growth-inducing (»productive«) quality these repeated experiences have, they lead to a more or less stable sense of trust in oneself and in the surrounding environment.

The existence of something like a self as a psychic and neural structural formation can be felt in the following simple observation. When we hear criticism or have doubts about ourselves, or in negative interactions with other people, we don't feel the ground slip out from under us, but rather we can more or less



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clearly sense the difference between their questioning and how we experience ourselves. The more productive and growth-oriented the quality of stable internalized representations of experiences are the more self-love and self-interest can develop, and the less antagonistic experiences of our faith in our self and in others shake our sense of identity and self-esteem.

The opposite, however, is also true: the less our representations of experience in childhood, but also in adulthood, contribute to our sense of feeling accepted, wanted, valued, sought, affirmed, encouraged, perhaps because those surrounding us only find us burdensome, or in their own selfish or excessive expectations are only disappointed in us, the more fragile our internalized representations of experience are or will be. And the more dependent we are and will be on actual experiences of praise and recognition.

This state of reliance on affirmation and praise means a humiliating, because permanent, dependence. For many this becomes so unbearable that in their self-centered character formation they seek a lasting escape: *they make themselves independent of the recognition of others by imagining their own greatness*. The others, the girlfriend, the partner, the colleague, the children, the patients are only of interest when they serve one's own greatness, that is, when they serve a mirroring or complementary function. Any interest in others' selves or their difference, even their foreignness, gradually wanes, because all attention is focused solely on the self. For Fromm, therefore, narcissism is always something selfish. It results from a lack of self-love and self-interest.

2. The narcissistic perception of oneself and of others

Such an escape from an unbearable to a narcissistic experience of identity always contains a *distorted perception* of oneself, but also of reality outside of oneself. This sort of distorted perception can generally be described as *idealizing* or *devaluing*. For that reason, narcissistic people are most easily recognized by their concern with greatness and idealization, or worthlessness and devaluation.

The most familiar sort of narcissistic self-perception is *self-idealization*: someone experiences himself as grandiose, and imagines himself the best, greatest, purest, smartest, most perfect and most successful. A narcissistic person may be conscious of this fantasy, openly living it out, or it may be unconscious, and he experiences himself as normal and modest – or he may not even be able to bring pen to paper because everything he thinks of seems too inadequate or imprecise. No matter, he can only perceive of himself and reality as grandiose or as worthless and empty. For this reason, every way out of his unbearable self-



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experience is narcissistic. We call it »negative narcissism« when someone completely devalues himself, experiencing himself as a loser or a sinner or unlucky, capable of perceiving his surrounding environment only in a distorted form. The self-idealizing narcissist tends to be more familiar to us.

Flight into a distorted perception of self fundamentally changes the relationship to other people and to reality outside of one's ego. Focusing all attention and energy on self-idealization is only possible at the expense of interest in other people and other things. We can distinguish *two forms of devaluation* of everything that does not belong to the grandiose ego (see Fromm 1964a, pp. 77–80; Fromm & Maccoby 1970b, pp. 254 f.; Fromm 1991f [1962], pp. 86–93).

a) Low-grade narcissism

In the first form, the narcissistic character does exhibit an – also idealizing – interest in another person or even in many other people, or in a theme or a project, but the interest, the appreciation, and the engagement return to the narcissist like a boomerang. In reality, such people attempt to instrumentalize other people and things for their own self-aggrandizement, so that the interest in them is really a *self-centered interest*. Many partnerships, parent-child relationships, and professional relationships suffer intensely from such an instrumentalizing, low-grade narcissism, what Fromm also termed *benign narcissism*. Those who are instrumentalized in this way suffer because, despite the proclaimed idealization, they always have the feeling that it is not really about them, but rather about greatness, power, the success of the other. Their only function is to mirror the other in his greatness or to expand and complement it.

From a psychodynamic perspective, the low-grade narcissistic character continuously stabilizes his endangered self by lending aspects of it an inflated meaning and instrumentalizing others to strengthen his sense of himself.

- These psychodynamics determine the dominant *character traits of the low-grade narcissistic character*:
- *Overestimation of self*: bragging, emphatic self-confidence, arrogance, self-praise, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, smugness, self-admiration; incessant subjectivism. The overestimation of self also exists in a negative sense as compulsive rumination, a wallowing in self-recrimination, in the form of moral misgivings; as a preoccupation with mistakes, physical imperfections, illnesses, and disadvantages;
- *A formidable self-centeredness and fixation on the self* (on one's appearance, speech, feelings, ideas, merits); in our era of electronic media, nar-



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cissistic self-centeredness tends to express itself in the use of tools with names like i-Phone, i-Tunes, I-Clip etc.;

- *An idealization of others*, to the degree that they mirror and complement oneself; an appreciation of what is familiar and a disdain for the foreign;
- *Disdain and disparagement* for everything beyond the self and of everything that does not mirror the self;
- *Escape into daydreams and imaginary worlds* that allow for heroic fantasies and grandiose role play;
- *Lack of interest and indifference* to everything that is unrelated to oneself or one's own issues;
- *Lack of empathy* and a general incapacity to feel mercy, compassion, or sympathy, to be helpful or to show social commitment;
- *Ambitious striving for greatness* and perfection, special status, superiority, singularity, excellence (one must be the best, greatest, strongest, most understanding, etc.);
- *Intensely vulnerable to and easily offended* by criticism and failure; incapable of self-critique;
- *Special propensity for depression* when one loses an idealized aspect of the self – for example, one's figure – or when the idealization of another person is no longer possible, because this person goes his own way and extracts himself from instrumentalization (depression not because of an object loss, but a loss of self);
- *Extensive incapacity to sense negatively experienced feelings* (guilt, anxiety, failure, dependency, helplessness, or powerlessness) and to acknowledge them;
- *Striving for self-sufficiency* to avoid dependence on others (not asking, requesting, thanking, apologizing, regretting, reconciling, or repairing).

b) Marked Narcissism

If the first form of devaluation expresses itself as a feigned interest, which is really a lack of interest in everything that is different and refuses to be instrumentalized for one's own grandiosity, the second form of devaluation expresses itself directly and without apology: to secure one's own grandiosity, everything that does not serve this purpose is experienced as a threat, declared an enemy and held at a distance. It comes to a parting of the ways. At all relationship lev-



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els it becomes a matter of either / or: either the other gives himself over so totally to the narcissist that he thinks, feels, acts, and wants exactly the same things, or he will be declared an enemy and belong to the »axis of evil.«

If the other, or anything different, can still exist in the presence of the narcissist, then only as an appropriated other in which there is nothing left of his difference (in narcissistic partnerships, this is often experienced as the »great love«). Such a possessive narcissism can be observed not only in partnerships, but in professional relations of dependence, sectarian and fundamentalist movements, as well in parent-child relationships in which the child is only seen as an aspect of one's own grandiosity. A criticism of the child (perhaps by the teacher) is experienced as an attack on the parents (and leads accordingly to parent-teacher conflicts).

But this markedly possessive narcissism, also deemed »malignant« by Fromm, differs greatly from instrumentalizing narcissism not only in interactions with what is outside the self and the other. In marked narcissism, the interaction with oneself also exhibits a heightened grandiosity and a strengthened defense of same which tolerates no questioning. This leads not only to a broad incapacity to be self-critical or endure the criticism of others (strongly marked narcissists are highly resistant to therapy and counseling), but rather because of their exaggerated self-idealization they need to keep every negative experience and self-perception at a distance. As a consequence, all deficits, imperfections, failures, errors, and any weakness in oneself must be denied and projected onto others. The *projection of one's own deficits onto stereotypes of the enemy* and the existential necessity of such stereotypes belong to the marked narcissistic character.

Narcissistic notions of grandeur *conflict* not only with one's own internal differences and with what differentiates others from oneself, but also *with external reality* and facts. These, too, are experienced as threatening and when possible are disavowed. Opportunities today to use social media, and through them *to invent reality anew*, have led to what is called our »post-truth« era. The truth content of information no longer defines itself by objectifiable facts, but rather by the emotional content of the message and the agreement with which it meets in social media. It is no surprise that very intense narcissists, and not only Donald Trump did so, systematically use this possibility to reconstruct reality in order to eliminate any objective circumstances and facts that oppose their fantasies of grandeur. Constructions that deny one reality only to create new ones have become a tried and true means of populist technique in business, advertising, politics, society, and culture. From a psychological perspective, this new construction of reality, defined by a fantasy of grandeur, always comes at the



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expense of any true sense of reality, with a loss of reality as its consequence.

A further feature of a strongly marked narcissistic character is a relative *freedom from fear* and simultaneously a permanent *readiness for aggression*. Instead of responding with fear, the narcissist flexes his muscle and becomes aggressive. What is projected is experienced as an external threat to the self. Because this is not a real threat, to which one would usually respond with fear and self-assertion, but rather one's own disavowed, negative shadow side, the threatened self does not respond with fear, but with distancing feelings and affects: disparagement, aggression, demonization, stigmatization, rage, hate, hostility, disgust, etc.

One other feature unfailingly describes a strongly marked narcissism: if the defense of the heightened grandiosity fails and one's *narcissism is violated*, the response is one of *annihilating rage*. There are few situations in which so much destructiveness is as explosively released as with wounded narcissism. Usually, the unbridled rage is directed at those who have violated the narcissism; if this is not possible, then the rage can also be directed at the narcissist himself.

Especially when nonviolence and pacifism form an essential part of one's own grandiose sense of self, wounded narcissism can lead to an »annihilating« fury and to self-destructive depressions that can end in self-harm and suicide. Frequently, such suicidal people kill themselves in a manner that symbolizes a fall from their narcissistic heights into the abyss: they plunge from a highway bridge, tower, or skyscraper into the depths; or they race at high speeds into a bridge pillar or without stopping into a truck.

The *strongly marked narcissistic* character can be recognized primarily through the following traits:

- In the awareness and *demonstration of greatness*, infallibility, superiority, invulnerability, excellence, and singularity, a sense of being chosen and called, as well as the *avoidance of rivalry* and competition;
- In the *creation, cultivation, and intransigent adherence to stereotypes of enemies* who are made to bear those personal qualities that one must disavow because they contradict one's grandiose sense of self;
- In the *disavowal of one's own feelings of weakness*, finitude, fear, guilt, and failure;
- In strong *distancing feelings such as disgust* toward everything that is incompatible with one's own sense of greatness and for that reason must be »excreted« and projected;



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- In a generally unconscious but *fierce envy* toward everyone who has an edge in terms of greatness, vitality, achievement, etc.; since envy would »betray« one's own dissatisfaction and neediness, it must be repressed; often it is only evident in a reaction formation in which envy cannot be felt at all;
- In a *split between good and evil*, in the division of people into those who are on one's side and those who are not («whoever isn't with me is against me»); in an *either / or attitude*, in a principled and uncompromising nature that denies ambivalence and projects negative aspects of the self;
- In the *aggressive instead of fearful or interested reaction* to everything foreign and outside of the self;
- In the pervasive *tendency to fits of rage* as soon as something does not succeed in a manner that corresponds to one's notions of grandeur;
- In the *avoidance of feelings of dependency* and reliance on others, which is why in interactions with others there is a lack of anything related to questions, requests, thanks, apologies, excuses, regrets, reconciliations, and reparations;
- In the *tendency to make oneself invulnerable and unrivalled* through unequalled perfection and high performance, or by sealing and armoring oneself off, and building a wall around oneself;
- In the *pursuit of narcissistic possession* and narcissistic collusions with other individuals or with collective entities;
- In the *pursuit of total authority* over others and in a lack of shame and ability to respect boundaries;
- In an *extreme irritability* that usually leads to completely disproportionate reactions through which the narcissist terrorizes his surroundings;
- In a *heightened touchiness and oversensitivity* that express an incapacity to handle criticism, and through which the narcissistic signals to his environment that any doubt and any critique of his grandiosity should be silenced;
- With strongly marked narcissism, any violation of grandiosity leads to reduced affect regulation, which manifests in *barely controllable rage, fury, and destructiveness toward others and toward oneself*;



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- Heightened sensitivity increases the *tendency to avoid confronting reality* and either to exist only in *fantasy* or – especially in our post-factual age – to *reinvent reality according to one's own needs*, which from a psychological and psychiatric perspective leads to a *loss of reality*.

c) Group narcissism

Both forms of the narcissistic character, the low-grade instrumentalizing and the strongly marked possessive narcissism, are nonproductive because they hinder man's capacity for growth in his need to satisfy his individual and social sense of identity. The same is true for *group narcissism*, which Fromm described for the first time in 1964 (Fromm 1964a, pp. 78–87). With the concept of group narcissism, Fromm illustrates the importance that narcissistic leaders and idealized social groups (nations, clubs, associations, parties, etc.) and family ties (clans, extended families, nuclear families) assume in order to compensate for deficits in one's sense of identity.

His argument is that one's own sense of worthlessness is not eliminated by one's *own* ideas of grandiosity, but rather by identifying with the idealization of that group to which one feels a sense of belonging and through which one feels a social sense of identity. According to Fromm, every person is from the very beginning a social being, and is related not only to singular individuals but rather to a social group (similar to what sociobiologists posit today with their attachment theory), which is why people do not want to experience their identity solely as an individual, but also – through their group affiliation – as social beings.

With regard to narcissistic group affiliation, Fromm writes:

»Even if one is the most miserable, the poorest, the least respected member of a group, there is compensation for one's miserable condition in feeling ›I am a part of the most wonderful group in the world. I, who in reality am a worm, become a giant through belonging to the group.« Consequently, the degree of group narcissism is commensurate with the lack of real satisfaction in life.« (Fromm 1973a, p. 230.)

Deficits in an individual's sense of identity can also be compensated for by identifying with an idealized group leader or group. In fact, this form of narcissism is usually most common in the political arena: from the *Führer* cult and racial delusions of the »Thousand (!) Year Reich« to the right-wing populist movements of the present and the fact that in 2016 almost half the American electorate voted to »Make America great again« and »America first!«

Group narcissism shows character traits and a dynamic similar to what can be



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observed in narcissistic partner relationships:

- The leader or group must affirm their own superiority and grandiosity and may not show any kind of shortcomings;
- Those who identify with the leader or the group struggle to maintain their grandiosity, train in apologetics, and suppress any questions;
- Any criticism must be kept at a distance from the idealized leader or group, which is why critics are to be muzzled;
- All deficits and mistakes are denied by the leader and the group, and projected onto stereotypes of an enemy;
- Other leaders or groups (nations, milieus, religions, refugees, etc.) are declared enemies from which one must protect oneself and when possible, are to be eradicated;
- Group narcissism pretends to be the people's voice, but is in reality anti-democratic;
- It shows no real (social, cultural, political, religious) tolerance and acceptance toward that which is external and foreign;
- Instead of community, group narcissism promotes conflict;
- Nationalism, patriotism, imperialism, racism as well as claims of superiority and infallibility are to be understood and unmasked as variants of collective narcissism.

3. The genesis of narcissistic character formations

The *genesis of narcissistic character formations* can be related to very personal circumstances, which is why Fromm speaks of an individual narcissistic character formation. When a parent mirrors to a child or a spouse, or a superior mirrors to an adult that they are only a burden and of no use, often the only refuge through which to secure a scrap of self-worth is grandiose fantasies – with all of the consequences that such a character formation then has for interactions with oneself and other people.

What interested Fromm much more, however, is the question of how a narcissistic social character is formed. If many or even sometimes the majority in a society or social group possess a narcissistic character, then this must relate to a mass experience of diminishment and a negative sense of identity as outgrowths of serious economic and social changes. Only this can explain the occurrence of a mass narcissistic character formation.

The narcissistic social character orientation indicates a psychic structural formation that attempts to remedy a deficient sense of identity. For that reason, the origins of a narcissistic character orientation are also to be found in those



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social character formations that arise at the expense of a growth-oriented sense of identity and self-worth.

Consequences already became clear in the psychodynamics of the marketing orientation. In the marketing of one's own personality, an orientation around success in the marketplace is usually only possible at the expense of an authentic sense of identity, because success is dependent upon the adoption of marketable personality traits. As long as personality training can leverage one's unschooled, stunted competencies and soft skills toward growth, such adoption has a growth-promoting effect on one's sense of identity and will not contribute toward self-alienation.

But, if anything, this is the exception. Generally, it is a matter of »competencies« that have nothing to do with one's personality. The marketing of one's personality means turning oneself into a product for purchase, and for that reason one trains those personal traits with which one can succeed in a particular market – independent of one's own personal characteristics, capacities, and problems. Anything that could interfere with economic aspirations of success is to be put aside, repressed, and denied. In reality, as we have seen, the marketing orientation corrupts any sense of identity and impedes the ability of the psychic capacity for growth to experience its own powers as a part of one's coherent self.

The successful marketing character experiences himself consciously as someone who is capable of slipping into every desired personality possible, and attributes his success and worth to this ability. He is usually also conscious of the fact that his sense of self-worth depends upon the response of the market, and he therefore must remain up-to-date at all costs and permanently optimize himself in order to stay fit for the market and his profession.

The manner in which the marketing-oriented person goes on vacation supports this analysis. Vacation is usually not for »relaxation«; it is also not a performance-free zone in which one can finally return to oneself; more often, a vacation is designed to be just as performance- and success-oriented, if by other means, so that one can congratulate oneself about everything that one experienced and »achieved.«

Only a few marketing-oriented people are truly aware of the fact that their positive sense of identity and self-worth is in growing measure completely dependent on a response of success and barely has anything to do any longer with one's own interests, feelings, desires, and capacities. That is why there is hardly any sense of meaning in their lives and work; there is a lack of »resonant experiences« based on an inner emotional relatedness, as impressively by described



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Hartmut Rosa (2016), which would allow them to overcome their alienation. Instead, the marketing-oriented person sees his own needs, feelings, aspirations, and longings as something external.

As long as this response can be produced, a deficient sense of identity usually remains unconscious, because the echo of success allows one to experience a feeling of self-worth. If success is likely to remain absent, or, for whatever reasons, really never does appear, then the development of narcissistic fantasies of grandeur are often the chosen method to avoid a mental breakdown.

The interesting point here is not so much whether narcissistic compensation develops only after the absence of success or before. There is much to suggest that the marketing character fosters, indeed requires, the development of a narcissistic social character formation, in order not to wind up on the losing side in the case of failure. What is decisive is that the marketing-oriented person does not experience himself and his self-worth based on the exercise of his own powers, but rather obtains these experiences externally and thereby suffers from a deficient self.

It is also important to consider that marketing strategies increasingly serve a narcissistic logic. Grandiosity, premium quality, super organic, excellence, the best of the best, the most ecologically friendly with the guaranteed best price, etc., are promoted and sold. Success begins when narcissistic needs and demands have been met.

Undoubtedly, major economic and social changes in the capitalist market economy play a crucial role in explaining the widespread formation of the narcissistic social character. This also is true in individual cases where a mixture of social and individual experiences of devaluation may lead to a narcissistic character formation. Major socio-economic changes were already briefly addressed in the description of the marketing orientation.

From a socio-psychoanalytic perspective, a new social character orientation has since developed. Its fundamental goal is no longer success, but rather the wish to do everything new and differently, with autonomy: we should have the independence to construct our limited surrounding reality, but also our own limited personality, anew and differently. I call this the »ego-orientation.« This new social character formation described in the following section is unthinkable without what we describe as the »digital revolution.« Indeed, it is these technical innovations that have led and are still leading to serious changes in all areas of life. Their psychological relevance should be briefly mentioned here (for more detail, see Funk 2011, pp. 43–82).

Digital technology, electronic media, and networking technology have made



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possible new products and production methods that show us at every turn how man-made digital, electronic, and media marvels have the capacity to do so much more than man ever could with his own physical, emotional, and intellectual powers. This devaluation of man's unique powers means that they become ever more »deactivated« with one's own »externalized« capacity now sought in technological marvels.

In the ego-oriented character, there is a sort of symbiosis with and existential dependence on technological capability. The term »iPhone« captures this well: who am I if I cannot have an I-Phone? The I, or ego, and the medium have entered into a symbiosis. As long as we have this technological capability at our disposal, an impending incapacity – namely, the inability to draw on our own cognitive and emotional strengths any longer – does not surface. In the marketing orientation, »success« is the cure that prevents any awareness of our loss of self; in the ego orientation, the medium is the cure that protects us from feeling unmotivated, empty, and isolated.

Of course, there are many more reasons why people today have conscious and unconscious deficits in their sense of identity. Every narcissistic character formation – also that of group narcissism – represents a psychically nonproductive processing of experiences of devaluation. The contemporary problem lies above all in the actual devaluation of one's own capacities of growth in the face of a suggestive promotion of the superiority of technological solutions and in their actual superiority in certain areas, which is barely absorbed on a conscious level. The increase in narcissistic character formations shows that man unconsciously feels himself a failure and, without success and technological capabilities at his disposal, helpless and powerless.

Every narcissistic character formation represents a mode that hinders man's growth capacity and thus his ability to satisfy his need for an individual and social sense of identity. The most diverse forms of narcissism are – simply put – nonproductive because they strongly reduce the interest in and for the other that all living beings share, and sometimes with strongly marked narcissism, turn it into its opposite.

4. To overcome the lack of any genuine interest in others

Narcissistic character formations always come at the expense of any genuine interest in other people and for everything that goes beyond the comfortably familiar. They represent, even in their weak form, a major obstacle to the capacity to grow psychologically. Man can only grow psychologically when he is capable of breaking new ground, and when he wants to become familiar with what is



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foreign – in others and in himself. Because people differ from each other in multiple ways, an interest in the other is absolutely necessary for social coexistence.

In every form of narcissism, the other's difference loses its attractiveness and society's atomization advances. The stronger the narcissism, the more the lack of interest in the other turns into a hostility toward everything that is not one's own. Society's loss of solidarity evolves into battles between narcissistic groups within a nation, and into more or less hostile demarcations between other nations, ethnicities, and cultures. The grave social and political consequences of narcissistic character formations show that »narcissism is the opposite pole to objectivity, reason and love« (Fromm 1955a, p. 36).

It is important to note that narcissistic character formations result from deficits in one's sense of identity and self-worth, and that a deficient sense of identity is connected with the experience (sometime self-inflicted) of devaluation. Some concluding remarks that I offer with regard to the narcissistic character orientation, and possibilities for reactivating a sense of identity and self-worth, are intentionally restricted to the question of interacting with narcissistic people. Such individual efforts are often only effective when the devaluing conditions that lead to a conscious and unconscious negative sense of self and self-worth are also changed.

When engaging with one's own narcissism, and especially the narcissism of other people (partners, children, clients, etc.), one should always keep in mind that any criticism and irritation only strengthens the (often unconscious) distress of being unable to have a positive sense of identity and hence contributes to an intensification of narcissism. For that reason, the following two approaches are often as a rule *counterproductive*:

- Any attempt to force change (even with very well-intentioned advice) leads to aggressive or even enraged reactions, to an intensification of grandiose fantasies and / or to an even stronger blockade.
- Although often used as a method of change, the suggestive strengthening of self-esteem flatters the narcissist, but also generally leads to a mirroring of the grandiose self and thus to a welcome reinforcement of narcissism by a co-narcissist. The problem that the narcissist cannot tolerate any deficiency is not addressed.

Productive strategies of change aim to integrate deficient aspects of the personality into conscious experience and self-esteem. Only this can reduce the necessity for flight into grandiose notions of the self as well as the necessity of projecting disavowed aspects onto the environment.



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- This requires that one does not defend oneself against narcissistic hostility, devaluation, rage, and the production of stereotypes, but rather that one remains open to them with understanding. One must be able to feel: this aggressive, dismissive, arrogant, provocative person in reality feels injured, disappointed, and hurt;
- It does not matter if this is justified or unjustified;
- In such nonjudgmental empathy lies the key to establishing a relationship with the disavowed negative sense of identity and the deficient parts of the personality. What Fromm meant by »stop judging« (Fromm 1992g [1959], p. 106) was illustrated in the introduction under the heading »Letting Someone Sense: This is You«;
- Psychotherapeutic experience indicates the actual difficulty is that empathic access to the split-off side is first rejected (perhaps by demeaning comments about the therapist, by aggressive reactions, or even by not coming to therapy); here patience and stamina are required. Sometimes resistance to letting someone else feel one's low self-worth can only be given up when the narcissist can sense that the other knows this sort of distress (perhaps because something humiliating happened to him, too);
- In parallel to the efforts to liberate the narcissist from his »splendid isolation« through a nonjudgmental empathy, so that his interest in other people and things external to him becomes palpable again, it is necessary to make past and present concrete experiences of devaluation (for example, in professional, familial, and religious contexts) conscious; there are also opportunities and chances to help the person achieve a realistic (and this usually means more modest) sense of self-esteem.
- What applies to working with the narcissistic grandiosity of the individual, is in principle also valid for *interacting with the narcissism of groups*. A pitched battle against nationalistic and racist narcissists is as a rule counterproductive and advisable only when social cooperation has been severely impaired; otherwise, here, too, a nonjudgmental empathy with these groups' experience of devaluation and the elimination of the economic and social dynamic of devaluation are key in depriving group narcissism of its oxygen.

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