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THE VIOLENT NARCISSISTIC IDENTIFICATION: A PSYCHODYNAMIC PROCESS

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I would like you to picture what the psychodynamic paths of violence explains within the narcissistic personality disorder. Starting by comparing the concepts of violence and aggression, then carrying out the functions of violence within the relational world of the narcissist and how these are used by means of projective identification and the role he play in the consulting room.

In order to clarify the water, the use I'm doing of the "violence" term, is strictly psychological and not referred to any fiscal behavior.

The aggressive type is a person controlling his impulses and acts only when forced and therefore becomes, for internal or external necessity, violent. Aggression is a natural tendency that has more to do with the instinctive apparatus without necessarily becoming violence. In fact, when an aggressiveness creates determination and creativity, we are dealing with a person's adaptive function, something that allows the individual to maintain physical and mental stability. Violence, however, is an interpersonal expressive form resulting from aggressiveness. As the main feature, the violence has the goal of physical or emotional injury of other people, which is why it may be a very interesting element for dynamic Understanding of narcissistic personality disorders. We know that the forms of violence can be extremely varied but, the one I would like to analyze now, is the one that develops in narcissistic people and, in particular, the forms that can be seen within the analytic space. (I am not speaking of physical violence?) Projective identification is a valuable interpersonal psychological process for seeing the dynamics of aggressive material within the subject, especially if the person is suffering from narcissistic personality disorder. Path Ogden was one of the last interpreters and researchers who have examined the subject of projective identification. According to him, this is primarily a defense, but at the same time a way of communication, a primitive form of object relation, as well as a route to psychological change. We also know that the content of projective identification relates very closely to transference / countertransference dynamics (although there would be important distinctions to make) which are significantly important for the conducting of any analysis, in other words, projective identification is a mechanism that can allow us, probably, more than any other, to access and to understand narcissistic aggressive currents. The aggressiveness that I intend to analyze is expressed by three different main channels. Each of these allows the subject to compensate for internal tension; therefore the aggressiveness is nothing more than a way that is unconsciously "selected" and its purpose is to bring the internal tension to a sustainable level for the subject, in order to avoid an unpleasant condition (Freud). This view derives from classical theory; it reminds us that the object, in this perspective, is considered useful to play the role of "target" or for "giving expression to internal energies".

According to H.Kohut (1971) the etiology of narcissistic disorder is a traumatic failure of the empathetic function of the mother and the negative effect of the development of the idealization processes; of course these traumatic failures cause an evolutionary arrest, and an endless search for an idealized self-object. The NPD, according to Kohut, could be a psychoanalytic diagnostic category based the transference, which reflects the patient's effort to maintain self-cohesion. He called it the first "mirror" by relating it to the efforts made by the patient to capture any signal of admiration in the maternal gaze, and now transferred to the analyst. The other form of narcissistic transference Kohut describes is "idealizing" and consists in giving to the analyst such exaggerated values as to border on perfection.

From a structural point of view, according to Kernberg, the main differences between a narcissistic personality and other forms of character disorders, are the differences in operation of the ego ideal. Normally, the idealized images of the parental figures are condensed into a structure called the "ego ideal" along with idealized parts of themselves. This process is then edited by the integration of a more realistic understanding of parental demands. However, in the narcissistic personality, this early fusion of the self with the ego ideal, with the subsequent devaluation of external objects and self image objects acts to protect the Self from primitive conflicts of an oral character and frustration (O.Kernberg , 1975).

In other words, the ego acquires a kind of omnipotence that should have been rightfully frustrated. To better these intolerable sensations, the narcissist, basically organizes his life as a network of "satellites of nourishment" from which he draws the material he needs. This network, which will represent an object to brag about like a collection of precious toys, will be powered by his denigrating and demeaning character behaviors and thoughts that in any case will head to a common denominator: aggression. Violence in the sense of his devaluation of the other will be the glue between the narcissist and these same people from whom he is nourished in the sense that they admire him. The devaluation of others and the emptying of the internal world of object representations, are among the causes that contribute to the lack of a normal self-esteem and that determine a strong inability to empathize with other people. It follows that the need to control others, while looking in every way to squeeze as much admiration from others as possible, is essential to compensate for the sense of inner vacuum. In the relational world, the narcissist is constantly developing relationships of dependence on himself, and this operation's main work is violence itself in the sense that I have been discussing it. Without this, such relationships never would form. The narcissist is an infallible hound tracking down admiring others. The narcissist is able to choose the right people who will drive him along his (emotional) and professional life.

wounds

I introduce now a metaphorical not original representation to express the image of an important psychological mechanism that helps us to deepen some passages of this argument. I will use the term "wound" to indicate a malfunction in the structure of the analyst's self. The analysis of an analyst also has the aim to dissolve the "particles" of life which have not been absorbed in the course of individual development. Of course, the result of the analysis itself, may achieve different outcomes and what we certainly all hope, is that these knots are positively reshaped offering to the analyst important equipment that he cannot ignore when dealing with certain personality disorders. In the case of the narcissistic disorder, expecting a total transformation of these undigested parts is a utopian perspective, even in the best case. What we really have to aspire to, is that the particles are sufficiently absorbed to become scar tissue rather than wounds, that means, brittle structural parts through which the link with the patient can become infected. What suggests the entrance of aggressive material through the analyst's "wounds"? The image of a wound, only serves to give us an idea of how pathogens that may come into contact with the body are not only of a bacterial or viral order, but also in the form of unconscious communication, so even the aggressive material, coming into contact with wounds, causes the body to mount a defense. The consequent defenses of the therapist would be interpreted by the patient as a rejection and fear; eventually these feelings would come back to the patient dangerously reshuffled with its originally projected material.

In the consulting room

What happens in the consulting room is often an amplification of wounds. The narcissistic patient will feel the highly unbalanced relationship since its structure allows him to mount a relational attack. If in this case the analyst is sufficiently free of "wounds", a "constructive metabolic process" of "aggressive fragments" projected by the patient can occur. As we know, one of the dynamics underlying the narcissistic disorder is precisely the need to acquire, via other people, a kind of admiration that could be described as "higher quality" or unconditional. An admiration that performs the function of real nourishment. It is also important that this admiration has a definite quality to the narcissist, he will be able to choose it on the basis of his taste and his own personal experience comparing people who have qualities to offer him. Moreover, this admiration should be able to match the fantastic expectations developed by the narcissist. Then it will be considered more valuable and therefore sought carefully.

The specific relational qualities sought by the narcissist in the other, if obtained in the consulting room, would lead to an extremely disappointing outcome for the results of an analysis. In fact, even within a therapeutic relationship, the narcissist will go testing the waters in search of what interests him more. I will try to show how he can get it. In the consulting room, the patient is able to establish a relationship through projective identification.

The self representations and devaluing the object are split and projected. In this case we therefore expect a kind of transfer of primitive object relations and then defensive actions characteristics of the stages preceding object constancy. This function can be conducted in the right direction, but depends largely on the ability to "feel" of the analyst. Projective identification always keeps its main function of defense, that is a process through which the subject can exclude parts of the self that are frightening or irreconcilable. The therapeutic relationship can go back to being a primitive form of object relationship allowing the patient to relate to a separate part object. In this case it is very important that the analyst has largely solved these aggressive cores closely linked to its internal objects (or parts thereof), otherwise, these "blind spots" of the analytical process will progressively widen to compromise the entire operation of the analytical process. Through what we call reinternalisation (considered by Ogden the third and final phase through which projective identification develops), we can create structural change within the individual self through active modification of the Self links with objects, thus favoring a decrease in libido investment in the ego ideal. This is done through work of feelings and emotions against which the person is struggling. Part of the projection means that these feelings are grafted into a host who can process them and return them in an entirely different way. None of this happens through a person actually seen as separate, but through the self projected into another, and by maintaining contacts with him as though he were someone else (Steiner,1993). The patient's omnipotent defenses are constantly used to secure his confidence and his needs. In this way, the analyst finds himself continually threatened by devaluing aggressions of his worthlessness and the patient's lack of sense of the whole process. We now take a step in a different direction and try to understand what are the normal flows of expressive violence, because what we are trying to do is to have a clearer perspective on the pattern of narcissistic violence. We have seen that aggression is a principle instinctively present in all people. This can take different forms of expression, including violence, but the violence of which we speak, fundamentally, can move in directions that convey it either inside or outside the individual. In case of aggression directed at themselves, the target of aggressive attacks are those internal objects that are not integrated with the rest of the self and have thus remained detached, completely incomprehensible and inappropriate for the functioning of the rest of the structure of personality. To obtain displacement instead of violence, the involvement of projective identification is important. In all its forms, violence implies the presence of a victim, and then of a target on which the "aggressive fragments" are to be projected. As I said, these fragments may be driven out only under certain structural conditions: the personality is one of the consequences of the development of the self that provides a vector to vent aggression. Unconscious management of the metabolic pathways of aggressive fragments may take different forms. The combinations of psychological factors behind aggressive behavior are potentially infinite, but one can, from my point of view, recognize three channels of aggressiveness that I will describe.

The aggression management channels

1 The aggression management through the first channel, takes place within the individual by means of fantasized aggression against those objects experienced as irreconcilable and dangerous. This is a management that could be called healthy because the individual is autonomous in the management of the static produced by the environment in which he lives. Thus, he does not need to borrow that skill from others, as does the narcissist.

Aggression may be fantasized and managed in this way only through a computer-like system that is part of human cognition (?) in ways entirely self-sufficient. Just as in childhood developmental stages described by Klein, the adult maintains the ability to attack his own thinking through aggressive Fantasy. This implies the presence of a pre-existing structure of the self sufficiently able to handle this type of material, a metabolic apparatus capable of tension reduction through imagination. In this way, the aggressive material is in a sense "attacked" by the imaginative function to obtain the reduction of the strong internal tension that this would continue to exert otherwise.

For example, observing the work of M. Klein, we know how the baby plays is a function necessary for the understanding of many elements of the reality that surrounds him. The acquisition of the "as if" structure takes shape in the years in which play takes the place of actually providing the child a real artificial experimental laboratory where the endless internal realities are merged with the various ingredients of the external reality. The alloys that will come out as a result of the early years of play, and then interaction with the surrounding environment. This will be the same material with which the child plays, literally building structure. Play is one of the child's ways to project out of more or less animated objects, a whole series of aggressive hypotheses that must be tested before using on human subjects. During growth, the individual works with aspects of aggression that can be, through fantasy, deposited in another person, so that he does not notice that he had lost the connection both with himself and with the other person (T. Ogden p22). The acquisition of this information allows the child to integrate new information with previous information obtained "in his laboratory" -. This experiential aspect is developed in every individual, either through experience from the environment, which through fantasy, freely attacks the objects that make up his inner world. What, for structural causes of the Self, cannot be processed internally, automatically reaches the level of inner sublimation or external action.

2 In the second channel, the aggressiveness is not able to find a way so that the drives can be processed in an appropriate manner, because the structures that should be developed within the Self do not exist, or are not sufficiently developed to allow reduction of tension. In this case, both the real experiences and those imagined contribute in creating a state of tension that cannot be relieved due to the lack of mental structures that enable sublimation, which in turn, brings comfort.

It is important to remember that violence is almost always the basis of the trauma, and one of the consequences of the trauma is a deficiency in the formation of the Self structures able to manage an attack, so that's why childhoods spent in violent environments, in our case we use the term "denigrating violence", are the reason some individuals are incapable of creating interpersonal relationships based on love and affection.

3 In the third channel violence is ousted projective identification. This mental function is developed by the individual to get rid of emotions that do not fit in the object relations of the person's system, they are expelled as "aggressive splinters" to settle in a host organism through his wounds. At this point it is important for the narcissist to play all the cards at his disposal so that he can establish a lasting relationship with the person hosting his projections. In this way, the experience can translate into unconditional admiration. Ogden identifies this step in projective identification with the term "interpersonal pressure". Managing the transference aspects of a therapeutic relationship linked to narcissistic dynamics is perhaps one of the most complex realities that we face in the space of a psychoanalysis.

Freud, based on the economic model that emphasized the importance of mental energy and instinctual investments, had come to the conclusion that patients suffering from narcissistic disorder were not analyzable because they could not develop the typical features of the transference neurosis. Many narcissistic patients appear in fact not involved for a long time with the analyst,

contrary to what happens in neurotic patients. Only recently have clinicians understood that the apparent lack of transference of these patients is the characteristic transference itself. (Brenner, 1982)

This professional challenge is made even more complex if there are unresolved narcissistic nuclei in the analyst. The analyst's useful role in the consulting room may be at risk if he was not previously able to address and resolve sufficiently his own narcissistic issues. The importance of solving the narcissistic aspects present in the analyst is the basis of his future ability to feel empathically, and empathy is one of those tools undeniably recognized as fundamental, so that we could call it essential for the smooth conduct of therapy. For the narcissist it is extremely difficult, almost impossible, to relate to others with a positive empathy. However, he badly needs the positive empathy of the analyst. I do not think it is correct to say that the narcissistic patient is free of empathic tools. It is more appropriate to emphasize that empathy is one of the narcissist's abilities, enabling him to experience the emotional state of those who come into contact with him, but the use that he makes of this information is solely and entirely in his favor. So, it is quite normal to expect aggressive behavior of the devaluing type at first, in a session as well as in any relationship of his extra-analytic life. Devaluations are certainly the behaviors which the narcissist knows best and benefits from. Devaluations that protect his satisfaction and survival, are nothing more than projections from aggressive splinters of which I spoke earlier. The "patient request" in the narcissistic analytical framework is to have a certification of his grandeur, you are to restore cracked tools that allowed him to create and maintain the network of nourishment.

The screened material can enter the therapist through two roads:

1. Through the access route he has developed through clinical experience. What the analyst needs to do is to handle the projected material via his own skills, to produce constructive change.
2. Through the "wounds" I mentioned above, genetically previous to his own analysis but that the analysis has not been able to suture in an adequate manner.

conclusions

The analyst's ability to "feel" what can be a role or a thought that does not belong to him, and having developed the functional capacity for empathy in his analytical role is the basis for the recognition of the aggressive material projected by the narcissistic patient. Through the ability of this analytical sensing, we can more clearly trace the movements of aggression in both the intrapsychic dynamics of the person, and the interpersonal. In the interpersonal reality of people with NPD, aggression has a well-defined communicative function, so it is necessary for therapists to recognize, intensity, nature and origin to untie themselves from the usual defensive reactions that would be raised. We also need to ask ourselves how we can get intimately in touch with this flow of important information, how to use it, and what tools we need to be able to investigate them and especially how to sharpen them. We have seen that encouraging the development of the empathic ability of the analyst may be a condition that can make the difference between a success or a failure of the treatment, and perhaps this aspect needs to be deepened and made more and more receptive. you can accomplish this only in the analyst's personal analysis time. This may allow the analyst to isolate the expressive paths of violence within the consulting room maintaining a restraining-processing position of the projected material meaning that the analyst does not force to own the projected material. It is useless to get rid of a hot potato that we can not handle.

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