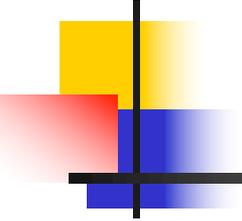


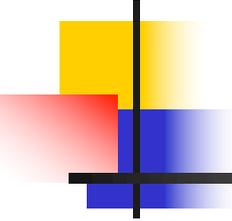
Treating the Narcissistic Couple

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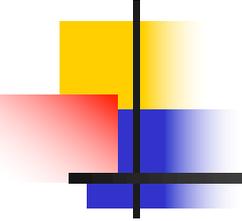
What is Narcissism?

- A very confusing concept
 - “In the voluminous literature on narcissism, there are probably only two facts upon which everyone agrees: first, that the concept of narcissism is one of the most important contributions of psychoanalysis; second that it is one of the most confusing” (Pulver, 1970)



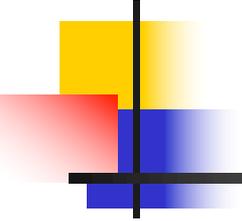
The Multiple Faces of Narcissism

- Narcissism has been described as:
 - Abandonment of the object (Freud 1914)
 - Grandiosity (Horner 1984, and many others)
 - Insecurity (Kernberg 1975)
 - Self-devaluation (Green 1999)
 - An attempt to retrieve the intrauterine state (Bolognini 2008)
 - A language game (Bach 1985)



The Multiple Faces of Narcissism, Cont'd

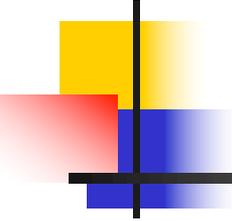
- Narcissism has been described as:
 - A primitive and frightening internal object relationship (Kernberg 1975)
 - An illusory fusion between a perfect self and perfect object
 - A response to dread (Kernberg 1975; Mitchell 1986)
 - A predominance of projection and projective identification (Rosenfeld 1964)
 - A rejection of psychic reality (Rosenfeld 1964)



The Genesis of Narcissism in Pathological Object Relationships

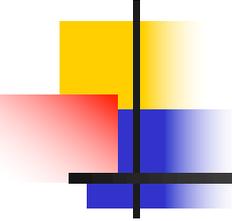
- Parental deprivation

- Chronically cold parental figures with “a degree of callousness, indifference, and nonverbalized, spiteful aggression” lead to a “hungry, enraged, empty” self that is “full of impotent anger at being frustrated, and fearful of a world which seems as hateful and revengeful as the patient himself” (Kernberg, 1975)
- Narcissistic defenses develop when a child’s “interpersonal reality has been so intolerably harsh and contained so few moments of empathic attunement that they are unable to create a life-sustaining fantasy of a loving parental object.” (Celani, 2014)



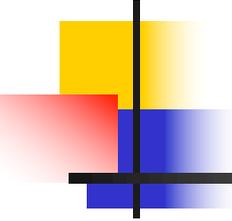
A Tentative Theory of Narcissism

- (1) Because of deprivations in primary relationships, the narcissist internalizes a split internal object:
 - The dangerous internal object: danger may arise from the internal object's superiority, persecution, judgment, violence, attempts to control or threats to abandon.
 - The idealized internal object: This object offers love and approval, depending on the narcissist's actions, thoughts or feelings.



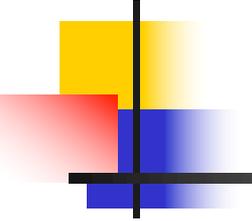
A Tentative Theory of Narcissism

- (2) The dangerous internal object creates an internal atmosphere of insecurity, dread, fear and envy.
 - In severely disturbed narcissistic personalities, these feelings may not be conscious



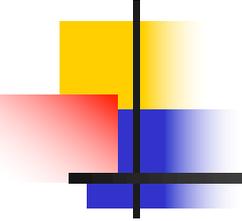
A Tentative Theory of Narcissism

- (3) To manage the danger of the internal object, the narcissist attempts to retreat from its toxic influence
 - This retreat takes multiple forms, and patients may utilize one or all. The most common:
 - Merging with the idealized object (Kernberg): grandiosity and false self
 - Attempted retreat from all object relations to an “object-free” zone (Grunberger): denial of need and desire
 - Identification with the dangerous object (Green): self-devaluation and deadness



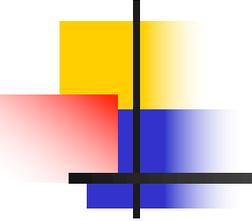
Narcissism in the Couple

- “Narcissistic pathology, as it is lived-out in real relationships, is more than an intrapsychic defense against conflict and internally generated aggression or a natural developmental phenomenon that has become pathological in the context of failures of parental empathy. What is missing in these formulations is attention to details of actual experiences with others.” (Maltas, 1991)
- Couple relationships that exhibit narcissistic defenses vary widely, but a few characteristics are so common as to be near universal.



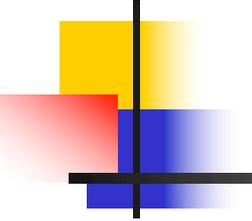
Narcissism in the Couple

- First, projective and introjective identifications are predominant, since the maintenance of the narcissistic partner's internal sense of cohesiveness, value and stability often requires that unacceptable material be projected and located in the other partner.



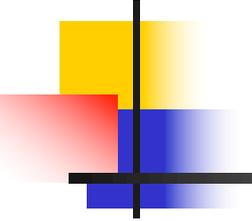
Narcissism in the Couple

- Second, a partnership in which one partner is narcissistic will not survive if the other partner's personality structure does not *fit*, in some significant way, the narcissistic requirements of the other. Couple relationships with a narcissistic partner typically develop a *joint personality* in which both partners' needs are served by the relationship.
- A *joint personality* is created in a couple when there is mutual participation in a cycle of projective and introjective identification, creating a “fluidity of ego-boundaries and identities” with shared or complementary objects, anxieties, defenses, resistances, models of marriage, fantasies. (Dicks, 1967)



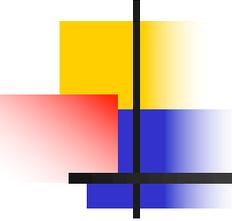
Narcissism in the Couple

- Finally, a deeper analysis of the two partners involved in a narcissistic couple will usually reveal that *both* partners are engaged in managing narcissistic issues, not just one. They will either manage narcissistic issues from similar standpoints – as when a relationship forms around mutual idealization – or from divergent standpoints, in which case the apparently non-narcissistic partner manages the other’s narcissism in a ‘mirror-opposite way” (Maltas, 1991) – that is, in an accommodation of the narcissism rather than a rejection of it.



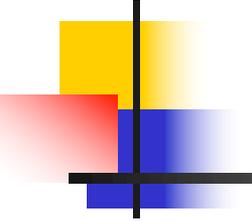
Transferences in Narcissistic Couples

- Because transference arises from projective identification, in narcissistic couples there will be *many* transferences:
 - Each partner has *individual transferences* toward the other partner and toward the therapist
 - The couple has *shared transferences* toward themselves and toward the therapist
 - Narcissistic couples move rapidly between these two types of transferences
 - 'What emerges as unconscious material in a couples session is, in fact, their shared unconscious life, shared preoccupation with danger-safety, with brutality-tenderness, scattered in uncoordinated mosaic fragments in both psyches.' (Gerson 2001)



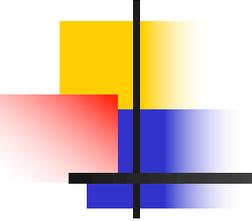
General Goals of Couple Therapy

- Provide setting in which the unconscious projected elements in the couple (individual and in the joint personality) can emerge
- Identify, understand and work through those elements (therapeutic containment) so they can be felt to be less terrifying
- Facilitate the creation of a 'marital container,' in which both partners 'can feel free to explore in the other the projected aspects of themselves in order slowly to re-own them.' (Cleavelly, 1993)



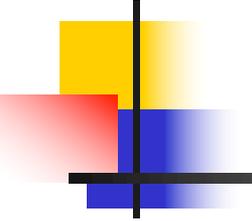
Treating the Narcissistic Couple

- Basic principles:
 - Map the internal worlds of each partner: what are their primary internal objects? What causes them anxiety? How do they manage their anxiety? What retreats do they utilize?
 - Determine the *individual transferences* each partner has toward each other and toward you.
 - Determine the *shared transferences* the couple has toward themselves and toward you.
 - How is projective identification used by the couple?



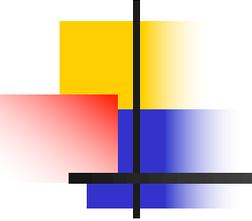
Treating the Narcissistic Couple

- Basic principles, cont'd:
 - What kind of joint personality has the couple created? What are their shared objects, fears and needs? Is one partner's narcissism driving the relationship, or do both partners exhibit narcissistic structures?
 - Be on the lookout for narcissism hidden beneath one partner's attempts to look like the healthy one
 - How does each partner use the other for the regulation of their self-esteem or sense of safety?



Treating the Narcissistic Couple

- Basic principles, cont'd:
 - Countertransference
 - Narcissistic couples typically elicit strong countertransference reactions and resonances in the therapist
 - Countertransference is a key to understanding the couple's underlying, and often denied, fears and defenses.
 - The therapist will experience countertransference to each partner individually and to the couple as a whole
 - How does your countertransference link to the partners' core dynamics?



Treating the Narcissistic Couple

- Basic principles, cont'd:
 - In the session:
 - Try to track what kind of transference is operating at any given point, and focus the couple's attention on important transferences (whatever their origin or type)
 - All transferences are in play in every session
 - A focus on shared transferences (i.e., elements of the joint personality) is fundamental
 - Individual transference analysis is done in the context of shared transference analysis
 - In this way, the therapist emphasizes that both partners have a role in the couple's problems

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