
The Sussicranistic Mind: a new diagnostic category?

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Abstract

This paper presents a thought for a new diagnostic category equivalent to narcissism. Taking as its starting point Neville Symington's definition of narcissism, the paper puts forward the existence of a correlative state of mind, 'Sussicranism'. This state is described and illustrated with clinical and day-to-day examples. The paper concludes with some comments on the relevance of sussicranism to the profession of psychotherapy.

Introduction

Neville Symington, a keynote speaker at NZAP's 2000 Tauranga conference, gave his most distilled definition of the psychic action of the narcissistic mentality at work in the mind as 'the obliteration of the other'. This central idea has been much elaborated, expanded and developed in his book, *Narcissism, A New Theory* (1993), one of the great books of psychotherapy. To give a speedy review of the central idea, what I understand by 'the obliteration of the other' is that, when the narcissistic state of mind is active within a person, the separate autonomous other does not exist. This may not be visible or evident at first glance but it is profound and total and very real. Where the narcissistic mind is in action what appears to be the other that is being related to, is not actually the other that has been sought out, inquired into, discovered and become known as something separate and autonomous in relation to the self. For the narcissist, it is, rather, an assumption that matches in with the requirements and motives of the self. In the relatively subclinical narcissism of everyday speech this is very common and unremarkable: "You know what I mean" when, in fact, you may not!

The narcissist obliterates the other to offset the fear or terror of annihilation of the self in the face of the existence of the other. The narcissist constantly feels that no-one is listening when in fact no-one can get a word in edgeways. Approaching the narcissist is a little like approaching someone in a swimming pool who feels they are drowning. This in fact may be a very dangerous thing to do as that person may push you under in a desperate attempt to save themselves.

When I heard Neville Symington give his compact definition, 'the narcissist obliterates the other', his aphorism re-arranged itself in my mind: the narcissist obliterates relationship by effacement of the other.

Sussicranism

I have previously put forward the idea that when you notice a state of mind or mentality at work in a person there will always be its direct, if unrecognised, and sometimes deeply hidden psychic equivalent or correlative in the other. This might be so for example in a couple, where the 'other' is the person being related to. What then is the correlative to the mentality of the narcissist? I am going to introduce a neologism. The psychic equivalent or correlative to narcissism is sussicranism.

There are two distinct, different yet intimately associated or paired mentalities both of which obliterate relationship: narcissism and sussicranism. Just as the narcissistic mind obliterates relationship by effacement of the other, so too does the sussicranistic mind obliterate relationship but by a different path. The sussicranist obliterates relationship not by effacement of the other but by effacement of the self.

The narcissist effaces the other. The sussicranist effaces the self. Both destroy the opportunity for relationship and both do so for the same reason - the terror of annihilation of the self. In a moment I will introduce a clinical situation but before I go on I need to acknowledge that there is nothing new under the sun. Do not be surprised if what I have to say is already familiar, even perfectly well-known, using different names, different conceptualisations, with different associations.

A case

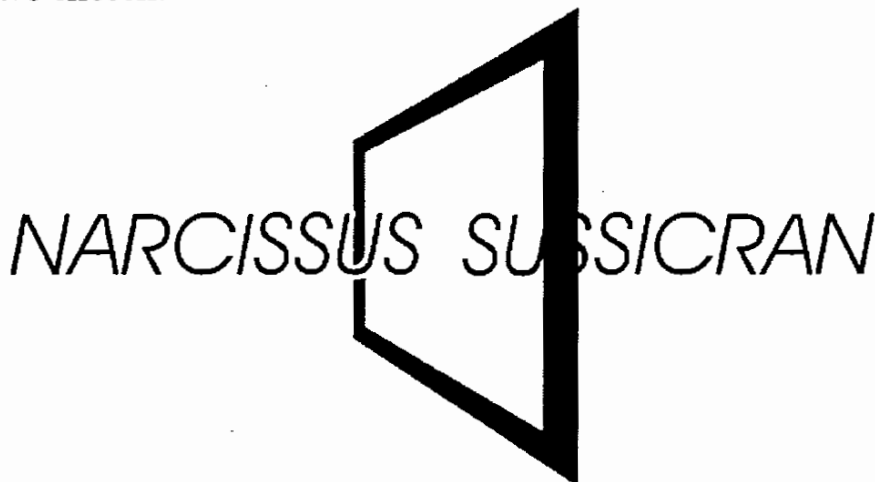
So, to the clinic. I am going to refer briefly to an aspect of my work. The patient, Polly, a woman in her twenties, intelligent and capable in the outward show of her life, has been unable to bring to an end, by outright refusal, her father's wilful and malevolent incestuous misuse of her that has carried on since her childhood. One day, after a sustained engagement in psychotherapy over a period of more than a year, she reports a dream in which her father uncharacteristically is smiling and laughing benevolently at her. She comments on the dream that: "Wow! Dad must be changing!". A short while after this dream she meets again with her father who has habitually used their meetings to coerce his daughter into sexual liaison with him. This time when they meet she manages with great trepidation

to say: "No!" - she does not want to have this sexual relationship. To her complete astonishment he immediately acquiesces and accepts this. She thinks back to her dream and concludes: "Wow! Dad really has changed".

I am going to use this simple outline of case material to make the following suggestions. Right away the father can be considered to operate from a narcissistic state of mind. He has no register for the actual experience of the other, his daughter. However our focus is on her mind and not his. Up until the moment of her dream she has been operating in relation to her father's narcissism from an equivalent but sussicranistic state of mind. In the dream, as a result of the therapy, she shows herself to have broken free of the tyranny of an inner 'other' that must be appeased. This allows her, when she actually meets the person of her father, to no longer have to efface herself and she says, in fact for the first time: "I do not want this, it must stop". It is not her father who has changed. Why should he have - he has not been doing the therapeutic work. She has changed. Throwing off the shackles of her sussicranism she is prepared to be herself for herself. Her father is affected by this inner change, as he must be. It is impossible for it to be otherwise, and he acquiesces. He no longer finds the psychic correlative to his narcissism in his daughter. Echo has spoken her own words with her own voice. She has made herself heard and Narcissus is brought to the recognition of the other as separate and autonomous. A subtitle to this paper could have been 'Echo also had a problem'.

Derivation

By now you have waited long enough for the root or derivation of this strange word I have chosen.



The root word 'Sussicran' is the reversed form of the word 'Narcissus'. I am trying to suggest a mirror state, an echo, an inverted or reversed form of narcissism not easily recognised as such at first, in its intimate connection with nar-

cissistic tendencies. If Echo had a problem, rather than simply a misfortune, what was its nature and structure? Was Echo an unrecognised Narcissist?

Back to the case

To go back to the case material, the idea I am trying to convey is that while taking the father's psychopathology for granted, Polly too has had a problem - a sort of inverted narcissism, a destructiveness directed not towards the other as in the case of her narcissistic father but towards her own self-hood, her point of view, her wishes. When she recovers from this everything changes. An important detail here is that it is an inner change that takes place and it can be seen in the dream. It gives rise subsequently to outer manifestations, for example in what she says to her father. But if she had simply said these words: "No, I do not want this" as if someone had told her to say these words, without the inner change having taken place, then the words would have been to no avail.

A misgiving

In what I have been saying there is one detail that may catch the attention and cause a misgiving about this way of thinking. All very well that the narcissist negates the existence of the other to secure the imagined wellbeing of the self. But how can it be that the sussicranist negates the self, rather than the other, in order to secure that same self? It just does not appear to make sense. I think the answer to this very worthwhile question lies in thinking that the situation might be like that of the suicide imagined in unconscious phantasy to secure psychic wellbeing. To our conscious mind this is a paradox.

Further examples

It is a risk, when I give a case example to illustrate a style of thinking, that the style of thinking will get welded in the mind of the reader to the particular example I have used. This can greatly restrict its availability as a useful concept in a wide range of situations. I do not want you to think at some point in the future: "Oh sussicranism, that's the thing that has to do with saying 'No' to incest". So I want to give some other simple examples.

I have found when I finally cotton onto something in the fundamental structuring of the inner world that I start to see evidence of it everywhere. It is no surprise to us to see the hidden face of human sexuality as the cap is pulled in a coke ad. or to read the anxiety in the play of a child. Likewise when one's interest is taken by envy or narcissism no day will pass without the chance to

observe their signs in action in a myriad different day-to-day moments visible both without and within. I have found this is so with sussicranism too. Narcissism can be considered to lie at the core of much everyday psychopathology. Where it is, there also will be found, somewhere round about, the clear evidence of the sussicranistic mind. Take the visitor, a narcissist, who blithely outstays his welcome. He may be coupled with a host, who, as a sussicranist, cannot ask him to leave. Watch the narcissist who cannot enjoy a film chosen by an other; see the sussicranist who is plagued by anxiety if forced to make the choice. The sussicranist cannot bear to finish the last of the strawberries; the narcissist cannot bear it when someone else does. For the narcissist it is a torture to take in a painful home truth. For the sussicranist it is a torture to speak one. The narcissist and the sussicranist are like paired polar opposites.

Character traits

We might be familiar with thinking there are typical (even if well hidden) character traits in those under the dominance of a narcissistic mentality. These traits are often thought of as unpleasant, hence the pejorative connotations of the term 'narcissist'. It connotes puffed-up, conceited, disagreeable, mean-spirited, arrogant, impatient or intolerant, unreliable, inconstant, easily offended; in a word - selfish. The narcissist is quintessentially selfish. It is possible to get one's tongue around the word and hurl it out: "You're selfish!" How disagreeable.

How often is it recognised that someone could be equally disagreeably 'otherish'. "You're otherish!" It just doesn't seem to work as well. And yet I am asking you to consider in all seriousness that this is an equal if correlative or inverted problem. The sussicranist may show all the dastardly hallmarks of humility, agreeableness, niceness, selflessness, helpfulness, tolerance, forbearance, commitment and dependability. What a rascal, eh? It is true, for these traits to be sussicranistic they must be used in the service of the destruction of relationship. For the sussicranist these traits efface the self and therefore work against real relating just as surely as the narcissist's effacement of the other works against relating.

Genesis and recovery

How might we imagine the genesis of sussicranism? Neville Symington pointed out in his book which I referred to earlier, that the origin or genesis of narcissism lies in a deep inner choice that is made in response to overwhelming trauma. He argues, convincingly for me, that because a choice is made in response to trauma, a choice to turn away from relational life with the other, then such a

choice can be remade in favour of a different outcome at a later date. It is possible to recover, to make a new choice away from narcissism and in favour of the recovery of relationship and life.

It seems to me that a comparable choice in response to trauma has been made in the sussicranistic mentality. As a colleague suggested to me recently, it is possible to imagine that, where the narcissistic path is chosen, the infant is, in phantasy, subsuming the power of the m(other). This is an 'I-am-everything' state of mind. Where, for whatever reason, a sussicranistic path is chosen in preference, then the infant is, in phantasy, being subsumed by the m(other). This is, in contrast, more of an 'I-am-nothing' state of mind. Both represent absolutely desperate attempts to secure psychic survival. They are the choices of No Choice, diametrically opposed yet each as surely destructive of relationship. In either case such a choice can be reviewed. A new choice in favour of life can be made when what is happening is seen, recognised, understood and renounced. This is usually a terrifying, daunting and painful task. It involves re-entering the relationship between 'You' and 'I' and, as such, is experienced as an invitation to re-enter an annihilatingly traumatic situation. It involves both 'self' and 'other', each experienced as separate and autonomous yet relating to each other. This is the challenge of recovery.

Envy and risk

The narcissist, as Neville Symington has pointed out, finds intense pleasure and excitement in the destruction of the other. The equivalent in the sussicranistic mind is the hidden enviously driven pleasure or excitement of self-destruction.

The creative act as far as I can see requires an overcoming of envy directed against one's own creative self and a capacity to bear the risk of failure and consequent shame. Essentially in sussicranism and in narcissism it is the destruction of the relationship that is so exciting. This is what is common to both of them though they take different paths. In the destruction of relationship there is a huge perverse pleasure which, in narcissism, offsets envy of the other. In sussicranism it offsets an inner envy of the creativity of the self.

A wilful destruction of relationship also offsets the risk and vulnerability that lies in suffering a breakdown of relationship that is not of one's own making. Intuitively for me this is like the child who, building a tower with bricks, will come to a point where the increasing risk of failure outweighs the creative pleasure. At that point the more certain pleasure of destruction wins out and the

tower is smashed down with great delight. No-one fails at smashing things down. The narcissist delights in the smashing of the other, the sussicranist delights in the smashing of the self. For both, the horrendous risks of relationship are managed by this manoeuvre.

The Sussicranist and pairing

I said earlier that narcissism and sussicranism are polar opposites. Anyone who recollects their schoolday physics will recall those little diagrams of magnets.



'Like poles repel. Unlike poles attract', and all that.

In 'pairing relationships' it is often so; $N \equiv S$. The narcissist, N, pairs up with the sussicranist, S. I have imagined that when you meet with an individual in your work, one of your first questions within your own mind can be: N or S? In a couple you can ask yourself: Is it: N and N, or N and S, or S and S?

Each of these pairings has its own characteristics. A relationship that is N and N is an unstable, overt hell. I think of the joke-like caption where a presumably quite narcissistic person bitterly complains of another: "He's so narcissistic even I notice!"

A relationship that is N and S is a stable, covert hell. Many stable, abusive, subjugating relationships fall into this category and, to describe them, clinicians often use such words as co-dependence, masochism, passivity, confluence.

And a relationship that is S and S? Well, at first I couldn't imagine such a pair existing, until a friend described a relationship that was surely S and S: "After you!" "No, no, after you!" "No, really!!" "What would you like to do?" "Well, what would you like to do?" (Could this have been a hell for everyone else?) Actually my friend told me the unconscious rageful tension in this relationship was dreadful for those round about.

While narcissists are trying to make themselves happy, sussicranists are trying to make everyone else happy. This is why pairing structures between N and S so often come into being. Opposite poles attract.

The tragedy for the sussicranist in this style of relationship, N and S, is that, no matter what the suffering, the sussicranist actively maintains the very situation that he or she cannot abide; there is a dread of 'making things worse' which I will return to in the final section. It is also, incidentally, a tragedy in like man-

ner for the narcissist of the pair whose actual if more unrecognised suffering is none the less for all its invisibility.

Sometimes the way a sussicranist effaces themselves is very blatant but often it is very subtle and its operation may leave the sussicranist totally bemused as to how they have arranged for their wishes to be utterly ignored by the other. I had a very good opportunity once to study a very ordinary sussicranistic moment, just the sort of thing I would do myself, though of course it is far easier to see such a moment in an outside situation. There was a large audience and a chairperson was taking questions from the floor. Several people had their hands raised to attract the attention of the chair. The person in front of me had her hand up for longer than the rest. As it came to the last question to be taken from the floor, matters became urgent and she insisted herself onto the attention of the chairperson. As his focus turned to her I saw clearly that she minutely, subliminally, withdrew her hand. The movement was minute and totally unconscious but it was enough. The chairperson had in like manner unconsciously read the sign and the chance was past. His attention moved on to someone else. Her frustration was palpable. "He ignored me!" she said afterwards, enraged. "Did you see?" A person in this situation does not readily want to know their part in what has happened.

Resentment, guilt and shame

In this way, while a narcissist may store up unconscious guilt at the destructiveness of their actions, for the sussicranist their fate tends to be the accumulation of massive amounts of resentment. This can become terrifying in its proportions and make recovery a very frightening prospect. The narcissist, in the process of recovery from a compulsive tendency to destroy the other within the mind, may have to feel the guilt of what he has been doing. In this process of therapy the narcissist in recovery becomes for others a much more likable person. By contrast, the sussicranist in recovery may unleash a dam-burst of resentment. Where the narcissist is becoming freed from guilt, by contrast, the sussicranist in recovery has to bear guilt, maybe for the first time (perhaps there is no guilt in self-effacement?). In the process of recovery the sussicranist becomes in a shallow sense a less likable person, though a more real one. In the process of recovery the sussicranist also has to be able to bear the risk of shame. There is always the risk of failure and of shame in any creative action.

Oscillators

Often, of course, what actually happens in the process of recovery is that the sussicranist 'flips over' into the worst excesses of narcissism. All the pent-up rage and resentment of the years of self-imposed servility pour out without

regard for the other. It is hard to get it right. As a result a person may oscillate backwards and forwards between narcissism and sussicranism.

I had the chance once to work with people in recovery from addiction, in a group situation that included their partners. I often saw this pattern in the recovery path of the co-dependent partners, who would spill out great torrents of resentment for the wasted years only to quickly fall back through the guilt of 'being themselves' into active supportive co-dependence, (supportive, that is, of the addiction).

It seems to me the great challenge of relationship - to truly have regard for both self and other, perhaps Buber's 'I - Thou'.

Sussicranism and groups

Another fruitful area to think about from the point of view I have been outlining is the psychology of groups. Broadly, again, the two basic positions of narcissism and sussicranism will be well represented in any group situation. Often the leader who emerges is in some sense narcissistic and the group in relation to him or her sussicranistic. The oft-referred-to 'silent majority' is essentially sussicranistic. In Neville Symington's Tauranga address he said that in a group, as in a session of clinical work, it may be that 'silence is a sin'. This is the sin of sussicranism. In group situations the narcissist commits the 'sin of speaking without listening' and the sussicranist 'the sin of listening without speaking'. If you are an oscillator between a narcissistic and a sussicranistic condition of mind, then you will be able to observe both of these tendencies within yourself.

Sussicranism and psychotherapy

I hope at this stage that I have managed to put across some thoughts on the existence, style, structure and origins of the sussicranistic mind. What then is the relevance of sussicranism to the profession of psychotherapy? It is easy to think that psychotherapists are nice people who want to help other people feel good. You might go further and say that therapists ought to show in high measure a capacity for humility, selflessness, tolerance, forbearance, commitment and dependability. Indeed it is reasonable to imagine that the profession of psychotherapy attracts a certain proportion of people who are particularly motivated to make other people feel better and that they have developed to a very high degree some of the personality tendencies that I have just outlined. What if some of these are actually motivated sussicranistically? It is useful, as a

therapist, to be able to see and think about and even reduce sussicranistic tendencies operating within one's mind, just as it is with narcissistic tendencies, or at least to be able to notice when this aspect of oneself is particularly brought into action.

People have often commented that the counter-transference to narcissism is a tendency to have one's own narcissism triggered: "Bloody hell! What about me!"

$N=N$ produces an unstable hell. This at least, being unstable, has a therapeutic potential for change if it can be contained and directed usefully towards a truly therapeutic end. The greater problem seems to lie more in the area of $N=S$.

The Sussicranistic Therapist.

Where the therapist is a sussicranist dealing with either narcissistic or sussicranistic problems operating in the mind of the person in therapy this situation would be expected to produce a stable, covert hell, that is a hell that may not even come to attention, let alone alleviate actual suffering. This is not a promising seed bed for psychotherapeutic progress. Especially so if there is a fundamental underlying idea at work in the mind of the therapist, that psychotherapy is supportive and has to do with generating good feelings. Here we can think back to the sussicranistic 'dread of making things worse' that I mentioned under 'Pairing'. The ability of the therapist to 'make matters worse' in a useful way, is a vital ingredient of growthful change in psychotherapy. The trouble with supportive psychotherapy is that it usually supports the psycho-pathology.

The sussicranistic state of mind is specifically orientated to generating good feelings in the other, out of fear, and with a totally hidden motivation of complete self-interest. This has nothing to do with relationship despite any appearance to the contrary.

Actual therapy takes place in relationship and has to do not with generating good feelings, but with developing the abilities to bear pain and to think. Where sussicranistic tendencies are predominant in the mentality of the therapist the scene is set at best for some degree of therapeutic stasis. At worst, it will always be either the narcissism or the sussicranism of the therapist's mind that wreaks havoc.

References

Symington, N. (1993) *Narcissism: a New Theory* London: Karnac Books