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The Traumatic Effects of Narcissistic Parenting on a Sensitive Child: A Case Analysis

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Abstract

The discipline of psychology and its sub-disciplines of social, cognitive, and industrial psychology undertake to identify taxonomies that help to identify, understand, and explain human behavior. In consideration of the traumatic effects of narcissistic parenting, this paper will discuss a single case analysis of patient A. In light of this patient's upbringing, I will discuss two main personality theorists, Freud and Jung, to describe patient A's self-reported personal identity, as he understands himself. I will describe the milestones that helped to formulate his beliefs, values and behaviors, familial and interpersonal relationships. The goal I will accomplish is to formulate a developmental assessment to support my theoretical perspectives of patient A.

Keywords: Psychology; Self-assessment in psychotherapy; Narcissistic parenting; Personality development; Childhood trauma

Introduction

Over the past one hundred years or so, the subfields of psychology; social, cognitive, and industrial psychology, have made great strides in helping us understand that notwithstanding our similarities, each person is unique. This uniqueness is not just a flattery or cliché, but based on personality development, heredity, milestones, family, culture and society in which people are raised and influenced by. Seeking to understand Patient A and the scope on his personality (his unique psychological forces) including his historical patterns of interpersonal interactions, is best understood in a social context. The first, primitive social context is childhood, specifically the first five years of development. Patient A described himself as being a friendly, agreeable, playful and conscientious child. He also stated that because of the intense cold and fearful childhood environment, he defended himself by being overly responsive,

tolerant of abusive language and behavior, accommodating and highly fearful [1-3].

From speech, perception, and interpersonal interactions with his primary caregivers, he had to protect himself and cope with early childhood trauma. Given the narcissistic and personality disorders of his primary caregivers, his main objective was to survive being a used child. Instead of having his basic needs met, his parents used him to satisfy their needs and every whim. Often met with frightening, intense, sudden rage, overt sexual, physical, emotional and mental abuse, he developed a coping orientation, to include cognitive processes, both conscious and non-conscious.

Sigmund Freud

Freud is heralded as the most influential personality theorist. He envisioned and devised an intriguing model of developmental stages, drives and psychic structures. As a highly gifted observer of human behavior, the unconscious aspect of his complicated explanations of personality have helped many people understand human behavior.

According to Freud, the child develops a superego around the age of five years old. This superego is responsible for providing the person with an understanding of what is acceptable in society and urges the person to value moral and ethical decisions. The ego mediates between the id and the superego and indeed protects the conscious mind from 'baser' sexual and aggressive urges through defense mechanisms and repression. Thus, a healthy ego enables a person to be rational and logical as well as establish boundaries for the id and superego.

In his introducing the unconscious, a hidden, buried, mysterious underground, where everything seems to take place, Freud made the study of human beings and personality, truly fascinating. His work helps the clinician to see how some trauma experiences and memories become repressed and buried, as part of the whole system of defenses, as a survivor's toolbox. Specifically, and because of the terrible physical, emotional abuse and neglect, Patient A became very well-defended, resistant and fearful in order to protect himself. He was faced with limitations due to the ongoing trauma. Utilizing

Freud's explanation of unconscious principles and concepts, allowed him to explore what he had repressed: how he originally formulated beliefs, values, behaviors, familial and interpersonal relationships, with a negative, frightening spin. In the context of Patient A's traumatic history, his own anxieties and defenses were a safeguard against stirring up the pot of emotions inside of himself. He sought to have conscious contact with his unconscious and with consistent follow through with the process, was slowly able to integrate his thoughts and feelings. This began an internal change from avoiding himself, to responding and simply be with those feelings.

Patient A came to see me at the age of 35 years old. He stated that he became more skilled and willing to turn inward and to face those fears and anxieties he had once been so defended against. In listening to the voice of his unconscious, he saw the power of how it revealed his personal blockages. This connection to his un-conscious, was very necessary to his process of trauma recovery. One's stability is particularly challenged when the traumatic event has been done deliberately. Particularly severe is the sexual, physical, or psychological abuse by caregivers, including harmful forms of neglect. Surviving such trauma is not an arena which one can, or should, handle alone. It calls for the knowledgeable and compassionate practice by a trained professional who, through a developed relationship with the client, will be able to skillfully take him/her back through the painful experience, for healing [4].

Our natural inclination is to shield ourselves from pain, and therefore psychological damage limits the expression of life and depression can become chronic. Patient A described not having any support during his upbringing and was left feeling very alone. One aspect of his personality that helped him cope, was to be very agreeable, or what some people call a "people-pleaser". A tenet of Freud is that healing from trauma will not happen until the person has worked through the experience. Repressed traumatic experiences often cause problems later and in varying forms. The frightening part of processing traumatic events is the re-opening of doors to terrible places, to facilitate recovery from the original event(s). Within the context of a holding relationship that is safe, compassionate and gentle, a survivor can acknowledge what happened, that he survived and that he is able to live a meaningful life.

In summation of his total personality as conceived by Freud, the patient described his three major systems of his mind, the id, the ego and the superego, as being at odds with each other. The purpose of the transactions between these three major systems, is to fulfill his basic needs and desires. Due to the severe early childhood he endured and survived, the three systems of personality were at odds. He felt frightened, defended, dissatisfied, and lonely. This strongly motivated him to increase self-efficacy, as he single-handedly pursued his education, career and built a healthy, solid, very productive life. At this point in his life, these three systems form a unified and harmonious organization, fueling co-operative, efficient and satisfying transactions with his environment.

As part of his personal growth process, we co-created an intervention plan which included these components: 1) A sufficient and healthy support network; 2) A wide range of effective recovery tools; 3) An understanding that recovery calls for a significant amount of patience, compassion for self, time and energy; 4) A willingness to approach oneself with great sensitivity and honesty concerning the realities of the traumatic events. In order to protect oneself from being overwhelmed, one must be willing to consult and learn from safe, trusted people [4].

Carl Jung

Jung asserted that there was so much more to Freud's theory, to include many mystical elements. For example, the collective unconscious common by people across generations, archetypes of unconscious symbols and a personality typology based on four functions of the mind-thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition. Carl Jung's view of personality was based on his general idea about the structure and development of the human mind, categorized into the conscious or unconscious mind. To Jung, the conscious mind was one, superficial layer. Beneath this layer exists the more archaic layers, parallel to the different developmental stages of the human mind. Jung understood the archaic layers as the collective unconscious, the container for what he termed "archetypes". He defined archetypes as saved traces of archaic ways of representing the world, world representations preserved from our human predecessors [5].

In addition to consciousness and the collective unconscious, Jung claimed that a third layer of the mind, the personal unconscious, was in between the conscious and collective unconscious layers. He posited that the personal unconscious characterizes a structural field of mind, containing unconscious content, formed from the individual's personal life process. The significance of Jung's theoretical model is the relationship between the conscious and unconscious, both personally and collectively, as a unity of opposites. Jung determined the unconscious as executing a compensatory function in relation to consciousness [5].

Man's real life consists of a complex of inexorable opposites-day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil. We are not even sure that one will prevail against the other, that good will overcome evil, or joy defeat pain. Life is a battleground. It always has been and always will be; and if it were not so, existence would come to an end.

Patient A described himself as a highly sensitive, intuitive, introverted, and deep thinker, with a fervent passion for the spiritual element in life. A vibrant internal world, heightened creativity, and intrigue with the collective unconscious, are the foundation of his personality. His process over his adult life, has been to carefully consider the concepts presented by Jung, integrating them with his own experiences, beliefs, cultural background, and personality. These ancient, time-tested principles have become part of his personal spiritual practice [6].

Elsewhere, Jung typified this fundamental attitude of human life, by writing: "everything human is relative, because everything rests on an inner polarity; for everything is a phenomenon of energy. Energy necessarily depends on a pre-existing polarity, without which there could be no energy. There must always be high and low, hot and cold, etc., so that the equilibrating process-which is energy-can take place."

Patient A has taken into account these characteristics of human life, living in accordance with his true nature, which means reflecting the inevitability of having both polarities simultaneously present in his life. While his core personality was originally shaped by terrible emotional events, the Jungian approach to personality, has allowed him to acknowledge his internal losses and gains, via a spiritual perspective [7-11].

A common theme in exploring his personality, in understanding its development, and in thoughtfully seeking personality growth, was to re-experience the past as the helpless, terrified person he was at the time. Along with this, is the urge to slam the door on the event and with it, the trapped memories and buried emotions. In honoring his intuitive, spiritual self, it took him beyond an identity of trauma survivor simply coping in life, to developing a personality that is authentic to him. What Patient A discovered, is that by exploring and honoring an internal spiritual systemic process (the realm of the unconscious), he had begun to discover his personal roadblocks, and over time, to either remove them completely, or serenely walk around them, accepting his limitations. He also uncovered his strengths, gifts and talents, all of which were once buried along with his long-forgotten history of trauma. Buried "secrets", wounds, and gifts all keep a person blocked emotionally and creatively [7].

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown the key factors that shaped Patient A's personality, involving early childhood trauma, which included great difficulty with parent-child problems in his family of origin. With parents who exhibited multiple and serious psychological problems, his first five years were shaped by coping mechanisms, in order to survive the cold, rejecting, narcissistic abusive environment. With parents' personalities that were abnormal, he identified through a so-called existential criterion that was a reflection of their parenting styles: authoritarian, rejecting, and traumatic to him as a child. These parenting styles directly influenced the formation of his

personality type, to include introversion, kindness, agreeableness and profound empathy for the mentally ill. Unfortunately, high anxiety, marked by periods of intense loneliness and depression, has been a part of his personality development. These aspects of his personality, the "night and day" of Jung's approach, is what Patient A continues to identify through existential criteria. The professional help he successfully received, helped to orient him to receiving outside help, and in "borrowing" his therapist's ego, he strengthened his own. As a personality type oriented to be strictly in compliance with other's needs, moods, behaviors and requirements, Patient A reports that he learned a great deal about both the effect of personality, and the ability to heal, grow and change.

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