

## Gender Narcissism

by Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D.

*The following is an excerpt of "Gender Narcissism and Its Manifestations," by Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D. (NARTH Collected Papers 1996). Dr. Schoenewolf a psychoanalyst from New York City who is the author of ten books, including 101 Common Therapeutic Blunders; 101 Therapeutic Successes; Turning Points in Analytic Therapy: The Classic Cases; and the paper "Sexual Animosity in Individuals and Society" (Issues in Ego Psychology). His latest book is A Dictionary of Dream Interpretation.*

The term "narcissism" was originally taken from the Greek myth about a beautiful young man who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water, jumped in after it, and drowned. The term was used to denote the attitude of a person who takes his own body as an object of attraction and desire, and is centered on the practice of masturbation. Since then, psychoanalysis has broadened the definition of narcissism to mean an excessive self-love or concern for the self, and lack of concern for others.

The idea of narcissism as "taking one's own body as an object of desire" could more aptly, I believe, be termed "gender narcissism." Gender narcissism develops in reaction to feelings of inferiority about one's gender and might be defined as excessive love or concern for one's gender, one's genitals, or one's gender identity, and an aversion to the opposite sex. It involves the formation of gender-narcissistic alliances rather than libidinal unions, and it is primarily rooted in the anal-rapprochement phase, during which time an individual's sexual orientation and identity are shaped.

In psychoanalyzing a number of individuals over the years who had gender-narcissistic features, I began to understand how gender narcissism is formed and manifested.

**Overview of Gender-Narcissistic Patients.** The male narcissists I studied had histories that confirmed the observations of classical psychoanalysts. Their mothers had bound them to themselves and prevented them from becoming pals with their fathers, often even preventing them from playing with other boys and later, from taking part in athletics. Sometimes an undertone, and sometimes an overtone, of emotional (or actual physical) incest permeated their relationships. Sometimes the mothers were hostile but close-binding.

The fathers, when they were present, were passive or hostile. There was often a barrier between these gender narcissists and their fathers, and the sons would end up resenting the fathers and displacing all their anger, both at their mothers and at their fathers, onto their fathers.

Mother--to whose allegiance they were sworn--had to be protected from their anger. This anger at fathers was then further displaced, and transferred onto heterosexual men in general.

Castration complexes of gender narcissists were manifested in a fear of competing with traditional (or heterosexual) men for the favor of women, or in attitudes of appeasement or disparagement toward women. One man had a compulsive need to dominate both men and women. Since most male narcissists are "oedipal conquerors," they feel they have already won their mothers (in fact, have gotten *more familiar* than they wanted), and do not wish to compete for other women. Such competition would arouse oedipal castration fears.

At the same time, they display an attitude of bitterness related to memories of having already been psychologically castrated; the source of this bitterness is repressed, while the bitterness itself is converted into resentment of the male role, envy of the female role, and an aversion to female sexuality.

In their treatment, the father transference had to be worked through first, then the mother and sibling transferences.

"Gender narcissism is...excessive concern for one's gender, one's genitals, or one's gender identity"

The father transference was apparent in ambivalence, and was comprised of alternately idealizing, then distancing behavior. Either they would try to please me, or--if homosexual, seduce me--or they would distance me. "You're straight (or, you're conventional) so you won't understand me."

Underneath this pose was a frightening unconscious desire to be initiated by me into the world of masculinity, often by being taken anally.

When they changed over into their mother transferences, they became submissive and idealizing and our relationship took on the quality of the idealizing, idealized, or twinship dyad they once enjoyed with their mothers.

**The Politics of Gender Narcissism.** A number of both female and male homosexuals had politicized their feelings about homosexuality. Not only their gender was idealized, but also homosexuality as well. Homosexuals, they held, were more sensitive, more humane, more refined, and more moral than heterosexuals. "If straights were as peace-loving as gays, the world would be a better place," was an often expressed sentiment.

Underpinning this grandiosity was the narcissistic anger. If I did not mirror their idealization, I would quickly experience this anger in the form of character assassination, threats, or hasty terminations. I also had to mirror their idealization of mothers, or face similar consequences.

Incidentally, it is this idealization of mothers and the almost complete and unquestioning identification with them--traceable to the inability to de-idealize mothers and separate from them during the anal-rapprochement phase--that lies behind the intractability of most forms of

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gender narcissism. The success of the therapy with them seems to hinge on the degree to which we can resolve this mother fixation.

My aim has been to extend the concept of narcissism as developed by Freud and others. I do not believe there is much that is new in this theory; rather, it represents a reiteration of classical theories of male and female sexual development, with an emphasis on the gender narcissism that is formed during such development. As such, it constitutes a new angle from which to view sexual development, and the use of a new label--gender narcissism--for the particular kind of narcissism that Freud and others have previously described, and which I have further elaborated.

Male and female narcissism are manifested in an idealization of gender, gender identity, and gender sexual characteristics, and a disparagement of the opposite sex. These factors lead to an inability to form genuine emotional bonds with members of the opposite sex, or with members of one's own sex. The bond that is formed is of a narcissistic kind--that is, an alliance designed to feed gender narcissistic needs (affirm one's masculinity or femininity), but it leaves deeper emotional needs unmet.

Since they are particularly geared toward fulfilling narcissistic needs, gender narcissists tend to form relationships which are shallow and denying of reality.

Gender narcissism interferes with sexual expression because it is closely tied to castration and oedipus complexes. For male narcissists, there is a combination of oedipal guilt, feelings of inferiority about gender, and a fear of castration which make sexual activity a self-conscious, compulsive experience. A similar compulsive self-consciousness inflicts female narcissists, for whom penis envy, oedipal conflicts (about separating from mother and getting too close to father), and feelings of inferiority about

gender combine into a disturbing force.

Classical theories concerning the etiology of gender narcissism have been borne out by this study. Close-binding, emotionally incestuous, or hostile-controlling mothers and passive, passive-aggressive, hostile, or absent fathers seem to predominate in the backgrounds of gender-narcissistic patients. Sometimes siblings also contribute to the problem. This does not mean, however, that gender narcissism cannot be generated through another circumstance--such as when a father is close-binding with a daughter, and a mother is absent.

**The Therapeutic Challenge.** Gender narcissism is resistant to psychodynamic therapy, due to the intractability of gender grandiosity, and to strong identificational bonds with idealized mothers. The anal-rapprochement stage seems to be a critical stage for the formation of sexual identity; hence, severe cases of gender narcissism can be reversed only with great difficulty.

It seems evident, moreover, that gender narcissism not only contributes to individual sexual psychopathology, but also--because of the politicizing of feelings--to social pathology. Female narcissists with masculinity complexes are often militant feminists, as are male narcissists with femininity complexes. Both are also militant about rights. Indeed, militant feminism and militant homosexual rights have been closely linked. I dare say there is not a militant feminist who does not champion gay rights, nor a militant homosexual who does not actively support feminism. This may be seen as a social manifestation of gender narcissism--an alliance of mothers and their idealizing sons on the cultural level.

Our society, and Western society in general, has become inundated with social problems that are to some extent connected with gender narcissism.