
The Narcissistic Role System: A New Concept of Systemic Role Theory

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Foreword

For many years I have been interested in the origin of narcissism and J.L. Moreno's reference to the concept of 'megalomania normalis' (Moreno, 1959). The issue of narcissism has arisen in my therapeutic treatment of patients using psychodrama. Many of the patients I work with have displayed psychopathological symptoms, low-grade self-esteem and, at the same time, the abnormally enlarged grandiose feelings, which we call pathological narcissism.

From my point of view, the issue of narcissism is very important and has been given little theoretical attention by psychodramatists. It has been addressed by a number of psychoanalysts, especially those in Kohut's

school – including Kohut and Ornstein.

In this paper I will discuss this issue from the psychodramatic point of view, using systemic role theory, which I have learnt about in my psychodrama training with ANZPA. If we want to treat narcissism in patients therapeutically, there is a need to make our theory more clear and crisp.

I am relating to the structure of personality as a system composed of subsystems. These include the 'pathological subsystems', which Lynette Clayton formerly described as the pathological Gestalt; the 'coping subsystems', which she described as the coping Gestalt; and the 'Individuated subsystem' (Clayton, 1975).

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In this article, I would like to add a further role subsystem. This differs in origin, form and characteristics from other role subsystems and develops a different future course. I would like to name this the narcissistic role system.

In the psychoanalytic field, Kohut describes the Narcissistic personality developing along a different path than the usual object-relations development (Kohut, 1983). I also contend in this article that the Narcissistic role has its own developmental path and has its own character, different from the normal development described by Lynette Clayton.

This Narcissistic role system comprises different elements to normally developed role systems. These are what I call an 'Infantile role system', a 'Coping Role System' and an 'Individuated Role System'.

The origin of the Narcissistic Role system is based on D. Rosenfeld's theory of Pathological Personality Organization. In his article 'On the Psychopathology of Narcissism' (Rosenfeld, 1964), he describes that the child's envy makes it impossible to introject the good object, and therefore he makes up the idealized breast from his infantile omnipotence. This is called Narcissistic Pathological Organization. I suppose this is nothing but the Narcissistic Role System itself, which I would like to describe later using some clinical examples. My thinking is also based on Steiner, who argued in his article

(Steiner, 1987) that the Narcissistic Pathological Organization originates and develops as shown in Figure 1.

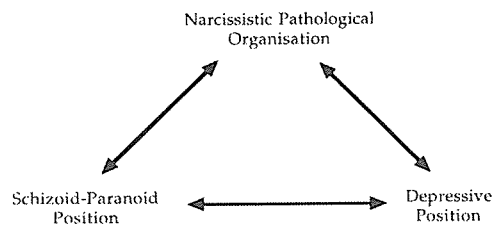


FIGURE 1: PSYCHODYNAMICS OF NARCISSISTIC PATHOLOGICAL ORGANIZATION (BY J. STEINER)

In this graphic Steiner explains that in addition to normal psychodynamic relationships of the Schizoid-Paranoid Position and the Depressive Position there exists a Narcissistic Pathological Organization which has developed through a combination of the narcissistic grandiose self and destructive impulses.

In this view, Narcissistic Organization differs from normal object-relations development because of its connection to pathological factors, such as the infant envy and omnipotence mentioned by Rosenfeld. From my point of view, if we apply systemic role theory this figure is transformed into the next figure shown below in Figure 2.

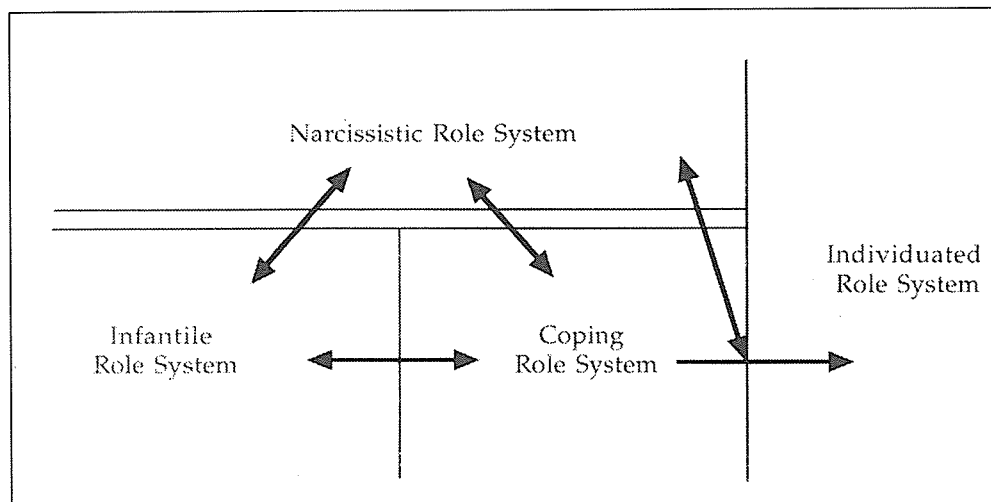


FIGURE 2: NARCISSISTIC ROLE SYSTEM



In this figure I draw your attention to the transcendent arrow on the right side between the border of the Individuated System and Narcissistic System. This shows the healthy aspect of narcissism called megalomania normalis. The arrow is bipolar, indicating how the role can easily transform itself. But self-development into the individuated system moves in one direction only. In this figure, coping roles in the coping system can easily turn into infantile oriented roles. And while these infantile roles originate in the infantile role system they develop into coping roles through interaction with the counter roles of others.

Also the Narcissistic role system is dynamically related to both the infantile system and the coping system. However, it is distinguished and divided from the normal development path of role systems through the splitting mechanism of the self.

The border between the Narcissistic System and both Infantile and Coping Systems differs from the border between the Coping system and Infantile System. (The later is only a fine line easily crossed since it is from the same origin with no special characteristics.) However, the border of the Narcissistic System reflects its different origin from factors such as envy and infantile omnipotence. Arising from this the Narcissistic Role System never needs the object, so there is a lack of the counter-role – an indispensable aspect in development of role systems for anyone.

The Clinical Instance

I continue my discussion showing a clinical case involving my psychodrama group for University psychiatric clinic outpatients.

This group first began as a trial group to establish the therapeutic effect of psychodrama in outpatient clinic settings. Three of the patients in the group were already doing individual therapy with clinic staff and two others were referred by a psychiatrist who thought that it would help their patients improve.

I will describe a session in the fourth series of the group. Each series involves eleven sessions, after which the group re-forms to include old members and newcomers. At this point the group comprises five members and three staff (one director and two auxiliaries).

The group comprises the following women – Sayoko and Mitsue both with chronic schizophrenic disorder (Mitsue is the protagonist of the session cited here); Yoshiko, a university student with a narcissistic personality disorder; Megumi who has a borderline personality disorder; and Setsuko who has an eating disorder.

The protagonist, Mitsue, is selected because her spontaneity level is high – measured mainly by her interest in being a protagonist during this session. She is 49 years old and for many years has suffered, and been in recovery from, a schizophrenic disorder. She was first admitted to a psychiatric hospital in her middle 20s. At that time she had the symptoms of auditory hallucination and delusion and loss of contact with people in the outside world. She had withdrawn from all interpersonal relations and enclosed herself in her small room.

At the time of this group she had recovered from most of her delusional symptoms and hallucinations, except in some instances, such as when making close contact with people she was most conflicted about, such as her sisters. At these times she sometimes suffered hypersensitive complaints that her sisters had evil intentions to make her obey their instructions regarding financial deposits. While she sometimes misunderstood them, sometimes it was true that her sisters had evil intentions to use her as their servant.

At this point, she had stayed in her community for over 15 years, was a good neighbour and had no troubles with the surrounding people. But she suffered from low self-esteem and loss of self-confidence and could not go out into society to work in an organisation.

Firstly she said that while she had an idea of her independence from her sisters, she was very

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confused and wished to become clearer about her relationship with one sister.

She told us using a metaphor that the silent, polite daffodil (like herself) has no means to transform herself into the beautiful, gorgeous tulip (like her sister). Here the director decides to set a scene making clear the relationship between daffodil and tulip. I call this symbolic concretisation, and have written about it elsewhere. It allows an easy connection to the protagonist's inner world, especially the protagonist with a heavy psychopathology.

Thus we begin the drama.

Mitsue firstly tells us that the tulip wants to talk with the daffodil, but the daffodil wasn't interested.

She selects Megumi to be the tulip (she had a quarrel with Megumi five or six days ago) and selects Yoshiko as the daffodil.

Tulip (Megumi): Let's talk about many things. I suppose that—

Daffodil (Mitsue): Oh, I am so tired to hear you.

(Mitsue reverses with Yoshiko, and takes the mirror position. Yoshiko and Megumi continue the scene)

Mitsue: She wants to guess and take care of others. She fears what will happen when she expresses herself freely.

(The director asks her to select someone to be a caring daffodil)

Caring daffodil (Sayoko): I am so fatigued, because I can not tell you about the differences between us. I am just taking care of you.

Self-confident daffodil (Yoshiko): I think everyone might accept what I say is common sense.

(director asks Mitsue to show how the tulip behaves)

Tulip (Mitsue): I am very selfish and get everyone to obey my orders.

Director: What do you do here?

Tulip (Mitsue): I order daffodil to go there and

fetch me some water.

Director: Reverse roles with Daffodil.

Tulip (Megumi): Go to fetch me some water.

Daffodil (Mitsue): You should do it yourself.

(reverse roles)

Daffodil (Megumi): You should do it yourself.

Tulip (Mitsue): All right. I will do it

Director: Hey, Tulip! What makes you change your behaviour?

Tulip (Mitsue): Because, she is so tough-minded and she will never change her attitude. As a matter of fact, she has only a few friends. I have a lot, but they were all so weak and have no power. She is alone but so strong and believes in herself. I need a lot of help from others, but she does not.

(reverse roles)

Tulip: (same soliloquy)

Daffodil (Mitsue): Why is she so honest in accepting her own weakness?

(reverse role to Tulip)

Tulip (Mitsue): Because the daffodil seems so bright.

Discussion

Apparently, at this moment of the drama we have discovered a big change – a transformation of tulip's role system. We might be astonished by the nature of the change in the roles revealed here. At first tulip was thought to be selfish, powerful and expressive, yet after only one role reversal, she becomes the weak, unself-confident one. This emerges from a quick role reversal from tulip ordering daffodil to fetch some water, daffodil refusing to obey, and then tulip suddenly changing her role to become kind, acceptable and cooperative.

No conflicts or struggles are revealed here. There has been no battle and no role has been treated. It is not clear what caused the change in the role! And we discover that there are no roles there, using the strict definition, 'as the



functioning from an individual assumes in the specific moment he reacts to a specific situation in which other persons are involved'. Of course, all the roles are imaginative ones, since they mainly belong to the internal psyche of the protagonist. But the role of kind tulip, where did it come from? It lacked interaction with other people and the counter-roles they bring.

This was coming directly from the imaginative world of protagonist's internal psyche, or from the desire of the protagonist. Desire produces the internal unconscious fantasy, so it produces the new changed 'role'.

I named this a narcissistic role (Yokoyama, Isoda and Isoda, 1999).

In this article I conceptualise it and make a clear definition of it. The narcissistic role has the following four characteristics:

- *It lacks interaction to bring about any change in the role system of the protagonist.*
- *The change occurs only in the counter-role and never from the protagonist's position in the drama.*
- *It lacks the counter-role of others. So it is enclosed and solitary without any vivid interaction with others.*
- *Also there is no indication of the spontaneity and creativity of protagonist.*

From the psychodramatic point of view, especially from the point of view of systemic role theory, it seems clear that in the internal psychic world of the protagonist, which is enacted and concretised on the stage, the conflict and struggle evokes the change of role systems through such techniques as repeated role reversal, mirroring for objectivity and doubling for support. This we call the dramatisation. And it takes a long time for any protagonist to find out the distortion of his/her own role systems and to change the role system using spontaneity and creativity.

However, in this case it has not occurred. Instead, the omnipotence of the protagonist herself is in control, and all the changed roles are coming from internal change without any conflicts. So there is no spontaneity there.

In the case of Mitsue described here, the counter-role of daffodil played by Megumi was firstly an aggressive and expressive one, but it changed when Mitsue took up the role, to be polite and respectful to the role of Mitsue, and then later to be afraid of Mitsue.

We can easily conclude the next facts from this occurrence:

- *These changes occurred in her own internal psychic world without any interaction with other people in her external world.*
- *The change is not only sudden, but has no basis in real role relationship.*

The roles displayed here – among them 'weak tulip' and 'terrified respecter tulip' are projections of her inner object. So they can easily change.

They are all narcissistic roles, with only slight differences in gradation as the drama progresses. Together they construct a narcissistic role system. This is composed of unchanged conserved roles arising from projection of the self. So the self-object counter-role of others has a tendency to easily and conveniently change. As you can see, they are all self-objects, not true objects independent from the self. So the true counter-roles are not present in the last phase of the drama.

From this we can conclude that the change portrayed in the drama is not related to true progress of the self. When the narcissistic role system is employed, the internal pain of impotence and desperation is totally denied through the omnipotent fantasy of the narcissistic world, where we, as a baby, have all the power and are almighty, since we think ourselves as God.

If this is true, then the next problem occurs, since Moreno described in his book *Psychodrama Vol. 3* (Moreno and Moreno, 1969) that all of us are God. This is the basis of psychodrama. But in psychodrama, we don't employ a narcissistic role system, but a true exchanging role system. Here we should distinguish both the narcissistic role system (pathological one) and normal megalomaniac

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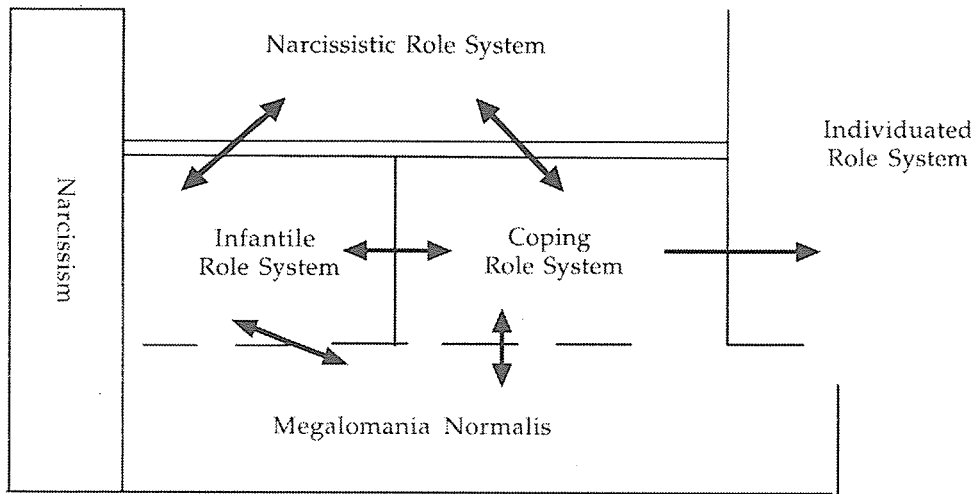


FIGURE 3: ROLE SYSTEM MODIFIED WITH DEVELOPMENT OF NARCISSISM

world. We can have a hypothesis that both have the same origin but that the later has mostly different features.

So we must modify our model as shown in Figure 3.

Here I have used the idea of Kohut's narcissistic personality development path. But I modified it to incorporate Moreno's notion of megalomania normalis and his concept of We-Gods (Moreno and Moreno, 1969). From my experience, normal megalomania involves needing appreciation from others. This is the major difference to the narcissistic role system. The easy accessibility and co-interaction with counter-roles is reflected in the dotted-line border of megalomania normalis. Both the narcissistic role system and megalomania normalis have their origin in the narcissism of the infantile identification arising from a primitive fused state in the mother's body.

I can easily give you one example which shows the difference between the two. It happened when I returned back to Japan from Jerusalem. I was on the train when a young American girl rushed along the aisle. Her mother sat far away as her daughter rushed here and there throughout the train. One old Japanese lady began to look after her and whenever she asked something or cried out, and the lady could not understand what she said, she replied to her in nonsense words. Both of them could not understand any words but they interacted with

each other. In this instance, this little girl's megalomania normalis was accepted and encouraged. Her words could not be understood and her play was narcissistic, but when the lady answered her crying in nonsense words, her narcissistic world opened to others and her boundary opened (it becomes a dotted line rather than a barrier interfering in the meaningful interaction for both). I suppose that this is the most beautiful psychodrama that I have ever seen. And also this is the answer to how the narcissistic role system changed into megalomania normalis.

Conclusion

I introduce here a new concept of systemic role theory – the Narcissistic Role System. The characteristics of that system are: its origin is omnipotence to avoid the psychic pain of object-loss; it lacks interaction with outer roles; it changes easily and suddenly without any treatment of role systems; and it does not engage spontaneity and creativity.

I hypothesise the narcissistic role system develops independently to the normal self-development path. While narcissism originates from the intra-uterine memory, afterwards it differentiates into two paths – one being megalomania normalis and the other a narcissistic role system.

Also I insist that treatment of the narcissistic role system is of utmost importance for severely ill people.

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