Narcissistic Privacy as a Barrier to Socialization

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Abstract:

A democratic society is characterised by tensions between private and public interests. At different stages of a society's development, the emphasis shifts to one side or the other within the dialectic of both aspects of the functioning of society. We believe that the degree of disharmony between the two can result in problems and phenomena that ultimately pose a serious threat to the functionality of society as a complex whole. This study focuses on the phenomenon of privacy in relation to human socialization in a changing open society. We are convinced that in the last decade and especially in the post-pandemic period we are experiencing an unhealthy assertion of private interests that stem from the narcissistic mental world-setting of contemporary man. We seek to highlight the causation and manifestations of a narcissistic culture, part of

which is a lifestyle of dominance of privacy curved in on itself, and the implications associated with it – especially in the realm of social interest and interpersonal socialization.

Introduction: The threat of narcissism

Christopher Lasch's 1979 book „The Culture of Narcissism" raised the issue of narcissism as a phenomenon in which Western society is stuck. Although the core content of this book was mainly reached for by psychologists and psychiatrists in the context of medical research, Lasch uncovered a movement of thought and values in his society whose unfortunate consequences can only now be identified with relative clarity: „It is true that a „present-oriented hedonism," as Riesman went on to argue, has replaced the work ethic „among the very classes which in the earlier stages of industrialization were oriented toward the future, toward distant goals and delayed gratification." But this hedonism is a fraud: the pursuit of pleasure disguises a struggle for power. Americans have not really become more sociable and cooperative, as the theorists of other-direction ad conformity would like us to believe; they have merely become more adept at exploiting the convention of interpersonal relations for their own benefit" (1). Alongside the medical connotations of Lasch's analysis, his voice warning of the gradual loss of interest in the future in the name of present experience and immediate gratification according to purely subjectivist preferences has somehow disappeared. In our work, we draw more attention to the very aspect of narcissism that obliterates teleological reasoning as Lasch implied. It is here that we see the core of the threat of narcissism.

The future is not only a philosophical question, but also a psychological factor, a sociological stimulus and a political-economic factor. If the future as a concrete mental project were to disappear from our temporal perspective, we would have to face a number of serious problems. While in the recent past there has been a discourse about the shape and form of the future and the ways to get there, in the present we see the problem lies elsewhere: in the loss of interest in the future as such. For if one loses interest in the future, one loses motivation for wider social interaction. As a consequence, one loses the soft skills needed to communicate and manage any project oriented towards a *'telos'*, where

the *'telos'* represents a temporal projection of the anticipation of the participating subjects present at that anticipation and planning time. However, if he does not develop his soft skills and even begins to lose them, his ability to communicate and coordinate solutions to problems that are bound to emerge over time will deteriorate. Given these preconditions, the death spiral of society and the entire ecosystem begins to unfold, consisting in the loss of coherence of the social complex.

Narcissism is a complex phenomenon of extreme solipsism, whose unambiguous definition has not yet been accepted in the ongoing professional discourse (2); this is perhaps because by its very nature it represents a paradoxical phenomenon in which we observe emerging characteristics that are not negative in themselves, while in a certain constellation of these characteristics, negative socio-pathological manifestations occur (3). Narcissism is on the rise in contemporary culture when it comes to the perception of the world as well as in lifestyles. The culture of narcissism poses a serious challenge that is currently being addressed by the global scientific community in an interdisciplinary discourse. Narcissism affects the whole of human existence, making it a form of spirituality. Its essence lies in the fact that man is attached to his own ideas about himself, life and the whole ecosystem to such an extent that he loses his sense and feeling for community and the integrity of the functioning of the social entities of which he is a part. He longs for love, admiration and acceptance, he wants to mean something and to be respected, but his growing need for recognition and admiration is not met. The future he dreams of thus becomes a projection of his illusory desire rather than a realistic teleological project growing out of the foundations of purposefulness, critical thinking, a healthy spirituality and a true knowledge of the world. (4). At the heart of the problem is the self-referential trap into which the human mind is swept and trapped. The self-centered, twisted world of anthropocentrism, coupled with the possibilities offered by digital technology, becomes the catalyst for extreme self-preoccupation, which brings nega-

tive concomitants into the life of the individual (5) and the whole society in the form of undesirable psychological and sociological phenomena.

Among others, the human world, characterized by significant 'human insecurity,' is influenced, for example, by the media. They boldly, directly, and loudly showcase new worlds, values, mentalities, traditions and religions. Moreover, they are established in society as opinion creators and shapers of public opinion (6). Another catalyst for extreme self-preoccupation, with many negative concomitants, is over-sharing content on the Internet (7) or completely reshaping the way interactions between people occur within the online environment (8). This also contributes to shaping the self-centred and twisted world of anthropocentrism (9).

Nutrition for narcissism

One factor that has contributed to the amplification of narcissistic culture is the philosophical shift that occurred with the advent of postmodernism. According to Hassan (10), modernists perceived the world deterministically with some certainty; postmodernists perceive the world in its indeterminacy. Modernism emphasized the goal and intention of things; postmodernism emphasizes movement, processes and opportunities. With modernism there was a development of hierarchy; postmodernism cultivates anarchy. Modernity favored typology, and postmodernity foregrounds mutation and variation. Modernism emphasized the importance of logos as a unifying principle of the universe that can be captured by language; postmodernism gives way to silence, rejecting the meaning of words as well as the word in the sense of the biblical narrative.

The postmodernist concept of creativity with its emphasis on the moment and the intensity of the experience itself, without a broader context beyond the temporal and social horizon of the moment, naturally reinforces man's solipsistic tendencies. „Whereas in the past the critique of reason was accompanied by an alternative foundation (e.g., imagination), postmodernism tends to abandon any metanarratives that might legitimize a foundation for postulating truth; what's more, it claims that we don't even need them, and they are no longer of any use" (11). Postmodernism thus becomes a worldview that denies all other worldviews. It becomes a path

to extreme subjectivism for which no normative is relevant and no way out of the impasse is justified.

The second factor is the presence of digital technologies and their impact of cyber-reality on the human brain. In video games, for example, participants can fly, pass through matter, disappear and reappear, create their own cities, islands, civilizations, governments, communities and at the same time they can afford to take risks knowing that „it's no big deal". With respect to the phenomenon of narcissism, these possibilities correlate with risk-taking imagination, a false perception of freedom and the empowerment of a grandiose ego. Research studies (12) focusing on the behavioural effect of cyber-culture on humans confirm that, despite the extensive communication in the online world, people paradoxically do not experience real *face-to-face* communication – one of the reasons is the absence of non-verbal communication, which makes people captive to their own world of ideas about what communication is and what it is not. He or she creates his or her own concept of understanding communication, which is, however, separated from the real world. As a result, the person may feel lonely, misunderstood and experience states of sadness that lead to a deepening of social isolation and, consequently, to the strengthening of narcissistic tendencies.

The third factor is the culture of the entertainment industry as an extreme form of anthropocentric philosophy of life and perception of the world. Social networks resonate with the human desire to show off in a better light, to display for admiration the often-fabricated stories and realities of one's own life just to keep one's virtual friends, and possibly to make new ones. The entertainment industry, according to Winter (13), offers various benefits and financial advertising opportunities for the user, who can thus become a virtual celebrity, influencer and in-demand personality. Not infrequently, this involves a kind of voyeurism, the sharing of racy details from other people's private spheres, absurd interpretations of events and extremist arguments. We believe that the growing problem of the increasing influence of conspiracies, trolls and hoaxes is a natural consequence of entertainment culture and part of a world in which anthropocentrism has become the exclusive interpretation of hu-

man existence. The absence of absolute norms and the displacement of metaphysical reasoning thus naturally creates a space for moral action in which autonomous ethical principles become dominant at the expense of heteronomous ethics.

Friendships on social networks are formed on the basis of a priori mutual affinities based on value preferences, fashion tastes, political opinions, personal goals or leisure hobbies. In such discussion threads, the spectrum of opinion is greatly reduced, and individuals who would cross it are blocked. The group of so-called friends is thus formed by participants whose attitude is indifferent or sympathetic to the views of the „creator" of the group. In most cases, especially among children and adolescents, there is a mirroring effect of the opinions, comments and ideas presented by the group creator on social networks. If the discussants do not want to be blocked, they refrain from expressing their real opinion. Lesková points out that one of the consequences of the mirroring effect in a media-saturated society is the absence of deeper discussion on status threads in the digital environment, thus weakening the ability to think critically and cultivate interpersonal relationships (14). The culture of the virtual world fosters individualism and weakens the mental abilities and social skills needed to form sustainable interpersonal connections in the sociologically diverse entities in which one finds oneself.

On the contrary – a healthy community environment is characterized by the dynamics of diversity of personality types, age dispersion, cultural and opinion differences, intellectual equipment, etc., of those who create it. Tensions of opinion and the ability to manage them are related to physical proximity, which encourages, and in a way forces, individuals to interact with each other, no matter how intense their friendship relationships. We can call this a kind of corrective mechanism of reciprocity of social interactions that is constituted by the variety of communication techniques, the variability of signals, experiences and skills that take place directly – face-to-face. According to Kondrla, it is the corrective mechanism that plays an important role in the upbringing of children, the educational process, as well as in other formative activities, such as sports and art groups, where one is forced to adapt to the collective, to accept

authority and cope with pain and suffering and the differences of opinion occurring in natural social relationships. In their study, Hlad et al. explicate the importance of physical proximity and the presence of addressing diversity of opinion and values within a social entity for progressive personality modelling of its members (15,16).

The privacy phenomenon

According to Habermas (17) the public sphere constitutes a key platform for the functioning of a democratic society, since it is here that public debates, the exchange of ideas and the formation of attitudes and value orientations take place, and they are translated into the institutional expression of the character of a given society. It is in the public sphere that the public authority is born that will promote these values, ideas, goals and ethical frameworks. In general, the public sphere is an open arena for all participants coming from the private sphere (family life and private space of existence) who create its form and character. The dynamics of the relationship between the private and public spheres are complex and may change over time, but the importance and place of the private sphere in the long term is unquestionable. In the case of totalitarian regimes, the influence of the public sphere, controlled by the ruling power, is dominant and interferes in the private sphere in often unwanted ways. It can even trigger political movements in the private sphere that develop into revolutionary processes. In the case of a democratic society, by the very nature of democracy, the private sphere becomes a decisive factor that will determine the shape and character of the entire open society.

The private sphere is the realm of the family and the home, which in theory should be free and independent from the direct influence of government and other social, economic and political institutions. The private sphere has its own dynamics, organisation, values and ethical frameworks, for which the citizen, the individual and those who make up the private sphere are responsible. It is clear that the boundary between the private and the public is a vague, shifting, permeable and is always evolving. As OECD research and sociological surveys of the V-4 countries show, interest in the public sphere, elections, and active participation in public affairs

has been declining significantly over the last decade. We believe that one of the reasons for this is the narcissistic nature of the private zone. If processes of mutual disconnection between the private and public spheres begin to take place, any efforts on the part of the public sphere to improve skills and revitalise the instruments of public functioning of society will be limited by the degree of disinterest in public affairs on the part of the private sphere (18). The strengthening of narcissistic culture in the space of the private sphere will have a natural consequence in that the citizen's interest will curve into their own bubble and consequently not only their interest but also the ability to interact with the environment will be significantly weakened. The loss of coherence of the public sphere is then an inevitable consequence of these narcissistic processes.

Current indications of private narcissism

When it comes to any initiative from the public, the typical question for an ordinary person in our society is: what will I get out of it? What good will it do me? How will I benefit from it? What will it cost me? How does that limit me?, etc. The very nature of these and similar questions in itself would not be problematic if it were not an expression of refusal to participate in public and society-wide matters. A typical example can be the characteristics of people's attitudes during the covid-19 pandemic (19,20,21) that emerged not only in e-learning processes, as can be found in Kobylarek's (22) work, but also in post-pandemic pastoral activities as reported by Kralik in his study (23) and similarly by Caban in his research study (24) devoted to the area of family life. Truth and reasonableness presented in public, no matter how scientifically proven, shatters into strictly guarded boundaries of one's own freedom and limitations within the private sphere. If the public interest is disadvantageous from the private point of view, if it collides with private rules and preferences, then any rationality and rule benefiting the public becomes unacceptable and is usually rejected. Naturally, the question arises as to how it is possible to promote interests beneficial to the majority in such a society – issues of safety, ecology, economy, health, etc. – if the public discourse is not even able to reach the level of professional sci-entific sharing and listening, because prejudices from the environment of privacy will a priori reject the concept of general benefit? In addition, as from the very nature of some phenomena, e.g., collective immunity in the field of health prevention, private and public interest can be mutually exclusive. Narcissism leads a person to one-sidedness, in which he prefers his own interest at any cost. He perceives his surroundings and thus the public interest one-sidedly, i.e., from the point of view of how it can help himself. In such a perception of the world, there is no room for private self-restraint in the interest of the public, for renouncing one's own advantages for the benefit of the whole.

The change in the relationship between public and private also has an impact on the formation of the identity of the contemporary person. The possibilities offered by his economic independence are almost unlimited in the environment of an open society. A narcissistic person will look for his authentic self-expression in all dimensions of his life – from choosing a vacation to the way he dresses and the design of his own apartment or house. „The other" and „the interest of others" disappear from his perception of the meaning of life and the perspective of the future. Everything revolves around a person being authentic, creative, progressive and successful – but in the sense of narcissism, that is – according to egoistic preferences and ideas of what progress, success, creativity and authenticity are. In such a view of a person's self-actualization, interest in the other person is lost. Public interest is denied. Any request from the neighbourhood is perceived as a threat. Only those who share the same values, opinions, preferences and lifestyle as the narcissist are accepted into the narcissist's world. Those „others" should adapt to his private sphere, otherwise he will label them as „non-adaptable" and perceive them as a threat.

Artificial intelligence and digital technologies play a significant role in the dynamics of narcissistic privacy, especially with regard to marketing and the online economy. The point is that the highly personal and specific characteristics of the individual, which are manifested in the online space where he enters, will begin to be mirrored thanks to AI, and business companies will quickly include the person with offers that

express his world. The same applies to his opinion preferences, which, if expressed in the online space, will trigger an avalanche of „information sources" whose rationality and ethical quality are more than questionable. In a world where truth is not objective but has become a commodity that is produced and sold, a person becomes defenseless against hoaxes and conspiracies. His private world is subsequently filled with toxic content, which increasingly weakens the position of man and his relationship with the public. In the environment of the growing influence of cyber warfare (25), the negative consequences of narcissistic privacy cannot be overlooked or underestimated.

Today's entertainment culture is dominated by „stories." This can be seen in the advertising industry, where the product offered must have a „story" (26). Likewise, the „story" is encountered in show business and in almost all entertainment shows, educational programs and benefit concerts – everywhere there is a key story to which the client, sponsor, listener or consumer of the sophisticatedly offered commodity relates. The congruence of the individual with the „story" has come to the forefront of narcissistic culture in the sense that the „story" being offered „outside" fits into my own story „inside" my own and unique bubble. The object of interest thus ceases to be the search for truth, but is instead about the selection of the stories offered based on how they fit with my story. A narcissistic sense of inner well-being and existential security comes when the events, facts, findings and discoveries offered fit into our own story. This creates an inner conviction that we understand the world properly and we can handle the challenges of life, regardless of whether we have bought into the illusion, the hoax or the conspiracy.

If rationalism rejected the Judeo-Christian story of understanding the world, then postmodernism rejected the need for any meta-story as a prerequisite for knowing the world and maintaining the coherence of a society in which diversity is preferred to the unity of the elements that make up the system. Narcissism brings about the domination of the individual story over all other stories and thus pushes philosophical pluralism to an extreme position: one ceases to look for a unifying platform for „diversity"

but the postmodern concept of *unity in diversity* begins to disintegrate into mutually unrelated entities. Zacharias emphasizes the need to search for the point of reference that would safely anchor this diversity and bring back the unity and interconnectedness into the fore: „Where there is no coherence, there is no meaning. We look for coherence between law and life. We look for coherence between word and deed. We look for coherence between promises and fulfilments. We look for coherence between love and trust. In short, there is a longing to find a connectedness in life" (27,28,29).

A person lost in narcissistic privacy has no real interest in the objective world around him – in the public sphere. He loses real connection with his surroundings. He ceases to understand it and does not care to influence it. One thus loses the ability to socialize and form relationships with one's surroundings, since encountering otherness – and the surroundings of one's own bubble are indeed different – is painful, uncomfortable and brings discomfort to the narcissist.

Conclusion

International research and comparative studies show that people close themselves off into their own private world, not only in an economic sense, but especially in a philosophical (theological) and psychological sense (30,31,32). Interest in public affairs is steadily declining. One of the reasons for this trend is the influence of digital technology and the online space, which allows a person to create their own bubble according to their own specific and highly individualistic preferences. We are convinced that extreme forms of solipsism at the individual level create a narcissistic culture that ultimately weakens social ties on a civic basis and also the authority of institutions and the state. Interdependence is fading, but independence is on the rise. As a result, the willingness and ability to agree, accept compromise, voluntarily limit oneself for the benefit of another, be willing to change one's opinion and respect the authority of another, and other relationship-building skills are lost. We perceive the following as remedies:

- purposeful leisure activities tied to the physical meeting of people of all ages;
- education about the benefits and risks brought about by the online space and AI;

- appeal to the media and cultural institutions to create a balanced field of information and an artistic space in which commerce and the mainstream will not have the highest preferences;
- a renaissance of basic philosophical questions in the field of knowing the truth and searching for the meaning of life;
- strategic preventive influence towards the private sphere in favour of the public;
- a public discourse that will openly and relevantly address the narcissistic; manifestations of the present culture and lifestyle and will look for ways out and solutions;
- purposeful support of the activities of communities and institutions that introduce the values of love, friendship, mercy, self-sacrifice for the benefit of the whole, teamwork and respect for others (33,34,35).

The narcissism of the private life of society is a serious problem that negatively affects the whole dynamic of the relationship between the private and social spheres in a democratic society and thus threatens its proportional functioning (36,37). The aim of this study was to contribute to the discourse on the issue of socialization in today's disintegrated society (38,39,40,41). Here, too, there are more reasons behind it. One of them, however, is the growing importance of the private sphere and the crisis of direction and functioning of the public sphere.

Acknowledgment

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