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Article information:

To cite this document:

Sandra Schruijer , (2015), "Narcissistic group dynamics in multiparty systems", Team Performance Management, Vol. 21 Iss 7/8 pp. 310 - 319

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/TPM-06-2015-0031>

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Narcissistic group dynamics in multiparty systems

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310

Received 13 June 2015
Revised 6 August 2015
Accepted 6 August 2015

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to introduce and illustrate the notion of narcissistic group dynamics. It is claimed that narcissism does not simply reside within individuals but can be characteristic of groups and social systems. In this case, the focus is on narcissistic dynamics in multiparty systems.

Design/methodology/approach – Social psychological understandings of group narcissism are complemented with notions from psychoanalysis. A systems-psychodynamic perspective, informed by psychoanalysis and systems theory, is adopted.

Findings – Narcissistic group dynamics in a multiparty context are illustrated by observations from a two-day simulation of interorganizational relationships that is called “The Yacht Club” (Vansina *et al.*, 1998).

Originality/value – In the social psychological literature, narcissism thus far has been largely understood as the prevalence of feelings of ingroup superiority *vis-à-vis* a particular outgroup. Sometimes the term narcissism is explicitly used, in other cases not, for example in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), a theory that is built on group members’ need to regulate self-esteem. Psychoanalysts adopt an individualistic perspective while aiming to understand the underlying dynamics resulting in narcissism. A cross-fertilization of social psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives results in deindividualizing and depathologizing narcissism and a deeper understanding of the dynamics of (inter)group narcissism.

Keywords Group behavior, Multiparty, Narcissism

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Organizations that develop relationships across organizational boundaries as in networks, alliances or partnerships, face relational issues such as developing trust, handling their mutual perceptions and stereotypes, and dealing with power dynamics (Schruijer, 2008). This paper explores the extent to which narcissism can color intergroup and interorganizational relations. Narcissism is not considered as an individual trait, but as a dynamic that can be a characteristic of social systems. To this end a systems-psychodynamic perspective is adopted. Below the concept of narcissism as it has entered the social psychological literature on intergroup dynamics is introduced first. Subsequently, the term narcissism is elaborated upon by drawing on psychoanalytic literature. This literature, developed through working with individual patients, generates an understanding of narcissism that is more nuanced than our common understanding of narcissism or the one that transpires in the social psychological literature. Subsequently, the implications of adopting a psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism in particular, and a systems-psychodynamic notion in



general, when trying to understand multiparty dynamics are depicted. An illustration that concerns seven parties that investigate the possibilities of collaboration in the domain of regional development is provided. The paper concludes with general remarks on the value of adopting a systems-psychodynamic perspective when exploring and working with multiparty dynamics.

“Narcissism” and intergroup behavior

“Group narcissism” in the social psychology of intergroup relations

The social psychology of intergroup relations contributes to an understanding of the dynamics of multiparty relationships. The two main social psychological theories that aim to understand the causes and dynamics of conflict between groups or organizations are called realistic conflict theory (RCT) (Sherif, 1967) and social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). They help understand the phenomenon of “we-they thinking” and other self-serving biases as well as win–lose behavior. RCT stresses the importance of goal (in)compatibility between groups, whereas SIT emphasizes the role of identification of individuals with a social group or category. These theories were developed when psychodynamic thinking was still prevalent. Psychodynamic theories applied Freudian psychoanalytic knowledge in understanding the determinants and dynamics of intergroup hostility by focusing on the individual exhibiting prejudice, using concepts such as the authoritarian personality (Adorno *et al.*, 1950), the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard *et al.*, 1939) and group narcissism (Fromm, 1973; Schruijer, 2008). RCT and SIT explicitly aimed to understand intergroup behavior at the group and intergroup level of understanding, not reducing it to an interpersonal or intragroup level of analysis.

By now psychoanalytic thinking has disappeared from the field of social psychology, despite the fact that it was originally expected to enrich social psychology (Schruijer and Curseu, 2014). Actually, it did influence the thinking of scholars interested in intergroup relations, for example SIT, even though its creators wanted to break away from psychoanalysis: SIT puts forward the importance of a positive social identity (the extent to which one’s group membership helps build a positive self-esteem) and studies the different strategies people adopt to arrive at a positive social identity. One, thus, could classify SIT as a theory that studies the narcissistic tendencies of individuals in their capacity of group members. Social identity can be seen as a measure of narcissism.

Recently, the term narcissism resurfaced in the intergroup literature as in “group narcissism” and “collective narcissism” (de Zavala *et al.*, 2009), now defined as “ingroup identification tied to an emotional investment in an unrealistic belief about the unparalleled greatness of an ingroup” (de Zavala *et al.*, 2009, p. 1074). De Zavala and colleagues have developed a scale to measure such group narcissism, namely the collective narcissism scale. It contains items such as “I like when my group is the center of attention” and “I insist upon my group getting the respect that is due to it”. As such, it is an individual-level concept, despite the fact that it is called group narcissism. One may argue, of course, that an aggregated individual score reflects a group climate – a practice that is more common within social psychology, also among social identity researchers – but thinking in terms of groups as a system level in its own right is quite different than treating groups as a collection of individuals. The variable “group narcissism” is then used to predict prejudice. The researchers find that the relationship is mediated by perceived threat. “Group narcissism” itself, however, is

not problematized or considered as a dependent variable. Yet, one could argue, that the more a group's status is under threat, the more narcissistic tendencies may be demonstrated. By using narcissism as an independent variable only, de Zavalla and colleagues do not allow for understanding what type of situations may trigger narcissism – the latter way of understanding narcissism would treat the phenomenon in terms of its dynamic features.

A psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism

Various conceptualizations of the meaning and etiology of narcissism exist. However:

[...] although the clinical theorists disagree about the exact etiology, they all see the origins of the fragile but grandiose self as a response to unempathetic and inconsistent early childhood interactions. Moreover, they suggest that narcissists attempt to fill the void left in childhood in their adult relationships (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 179).

A relational view, in which narcissistic dynamics are aimed at regulating one's self-esteem through interaction with others, is gaining importance (Shaw, 2014). All human beings have a need for a positive self-esteem and, hence, will engage in narcissistic tendencies. When attempts to arrive at a positive self-esteem are pathological, one speaks of a narcissistic personality disorder that is characterized by grandiosity, an excessive need for admiration and lack of empathy (APA, 2000). Narcissistic attempts to manage a vulnerable self are largely unconscious.

Moreover, within psychoanalytic thinking, narcissistic dynamics get expressed in different ways. Lay people, on the whole, are likely to associate narcissism with a grandiose self that need (public) affirmation, lack of empathy and egocentrism. It may come as a surprise that narcissistic dynamics may also be manifested differently, namely in an individual's similar preoccupation with (a vulnerable) self, yet doubting all the time, needing others to assure oneself, someone who cannot rely on his or her own judgment and who is filled with feelings of not being good enough. The first manifestation is called "thick skinned narcissism", while the latter is called "thin-skinned narcissism" (Rosenfeld, 1987). Both types share a preoccupation with self and the need of others to build a positive self-esteem. Thick-skinned individuals tend to make other people's lives difficult; thin-skinned individuals that of their own.

Understanding narcissism in multiparty systems from a systems-psychodynamic perspective

A systems-psychodynamic perspective

A systems-psychodynamic perspective aims to understand the dynamic processes in and of groups and organizations, functioning as social systems in a particular context. Individuals are considered, besides individuals, to be a group (and organization) member too – memberships that can determine individual behavior. Key concept is "person-in-role" which points to the interaction of a (conscious and unconscious) dynamic inner world of the individual on the one hand and that of the outer world on the other, expressed in individual behavior. Assumptions that characterize a systems-psychodynamic perspective are:

- that human behavior is a function of both conscious and unconscious processes;
- that individuals react to an emotional reality that is mediated through social interaction;

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- that behavior is shaped in and by a social system that consists of multiple, mutually influencing system levels (individual, group, organization, society);
 - that individuals tend to avoid anxieties and protect their self-esteem against threats; and
 - that work gives rise to tensions which may result in social defenses (Vansina and Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008).

Some of these assumptions are derived from psychoanalysis (e.g. the role of the unconscious, the need to defend against anxieties and the importance of emotional processes). Different is that the dynamics are situated in a work context and that they are part of a larger systemic whole. A systems-psychodynamic perspective does not consider pathological processes, yet involves the day-to-day tensions that are inherent in work life. Relevant pasts are not those of individuals in their private worlds, yet those of the work system. Interventions are aimed at the dynamics of the work community in light of the recent past and the representations of the external world. A systems-psychodynamic perspective is first and foremost a way of looking at and working with system dynamics and not an application of psychoanalytic knowledge (knowledge that is derived from individual therapy). Psychoanalysis offers inspiration regarding understanding emotional dynamics and the mechanisms of unconscious psychic processes (e.g. defense mechanisms, transference, countertransference, projection, projective identification), the conditions needed to gain insight into mental processes (e.g. holding, containing) and the importance of the relation between client and consultant as well as the attitude of the latter (e.g. in terms of negative capability) (Schruijer, 2013).

Implications for understanding multiparty dynamics

When adopting a systems-psychodynamic perspective on multiparty behavior, the mechanisms through which win–lose behavior, distrust and stereotyping occur become more clear. Through mechanisms such as projections, projective identification and splitting, group members can arrive at a positive view of themselves *vis-à-vis* outgroups or even engage in outgroup favoritism in which ingroup members have internalized the negative image that outgroup members have of them (Gemmill and Elmes, 1993; Niers, 2014). Such images and stereotypes as well as behavior in function of these may be seen as manifestations of underlying group narcissistic dynamics – namely, attempts to regulate self-esteem. Such processes are likely to be partly conscious and partly unconscious. Tensions and threats to one’s self-esteem are presumed to be an important factor in creating intergroup dynamics. These dynamics, furthermore, are not only created in the mutual interactions among different parties, they are also influenced by the larger context. For example, representatives of different organizations that met to discuss the progress of a large infrastructural project needed to deal with the tensions of not being able to deliver the project in time. One party, a tunnel builder, announced to be unable to deliver in time was cast into the role of a scapegoat. The fact that an external event that had led to a new (and more strict) safety law for tunnels occurred only after signing the contract seemed to have been “forgotten” at that stage (Schruijer, 2013).

Rather than considering narcissism as simply an individual characteristic, narcissism can be conceived of as a response to an experienced threat to group self-esteem in the here-and-now (*vis-à-vis* the other groups, in a particular context).

These threats need to be warded off to regulate self-esteem. It means that when trying to understand intergroup dynamics (e.g. narcissistic tendencies), one focuses on stimuli in the system that provoke threats to self-esteem – interventions too are aimed at the system rather than the individual or individual parties. Thus, a systems-psychodynamic perspective results in depathologizing and deindividualizing. This despite the fact that individual differences in narcissism do exist and may play a particular role in multiparty dynamics through so-called valencies (Bion, 1961). Valencies refer to an individual's susceptibilities and sensitivities, in this case, in the narcissistic domain, due to experienced early individual trauma – certain individuals may be more predisposed to narcissism than others. Narcissistic dynamics that are present in multiparty interactions may resonate more in these individuals than those who are not so predisposed and who, therefore, are more likely to act in function of these. It would imply that situations are conceivable in which the narcissistic behavior of one individual is an expression of an underlying (inter)group or (inter)organizational dynamic.

Empirical illustration: regional development and multiparty dynamics

Simulation The Yacht Club

An illustration is taken from a two-day simulation called “The Yacht Club” that has as its objective to allow participants to experience the relational dynamics of engaging in interorganizational or multiparty relationships (Vansina *et al.*, 1998). In the simulation, seven parties are confronted with a regional development issue and can use the set time to build relationships – if so desired – to tackle the emerging problems. The scenario is based on a real issue that developed in the early nineties of the last century in the St Petersburg area (Russia) as a consequence of the end of the Cold War. A major employer, a ship yard, did not receive orders any more from the Navy and had to reorganize. A local public authority was involved. Also, three yacht clubs, interested in developing tourism played a part. And finally, there was a bank as well as a group of young entrepreneurs that were interested in developing projects. In the simulation, the participants are asked to identify with the interests of their party (one out of seven), yet not to engage in a role-play. The simulation is played in real time (a minute is a minute) so as to stimulate participants not to fantasize and stay in contact with reality.

Over the last 20 years, the dynamics in more than a hundred simulations in various countries have been observed (Schruijer and Vansina, 2007; Schruijer, 2008). It is striking how often win–lose patterns emerge straight from the start and how difficult it is for parties to keep their options open – just to take the time to explore possibilities and after that make an informed choice on how to proceed is apparently very difficult. Under the rhetoric of collaboration, parties engage in win–lose behavior, form rash alliances, refrain from checking important assumptions (and thus keeping reality out of sight) and escape into fantasy and power play. In some simulations, they are capable of overcoming this relational dynamic. An important element of being able to do so seems to be a capacity to stay in touch with reality, review the relational processes and not to be overwhelmed by the inescapable win–lose dynamics that are likely to be present in the very beginning. After the simulation, a day is spent to review the dynamics by participants and facilitators. Through joint reviewing, the participants often come to see that they were so entrapped by the relational dynamics and were so content-focused that they could not break away from the win–lose spiral.

One particular run characterized by narcissistic dynamics

One simulation run was played very recently with 18 managers who took part in an MSc program in management at an international business school. On the whole, one could say that again win–lose dynamics were in operation and leave it at that. Still, the kind of win–lose dynamics were of a kind that it invited thinking in terms of narcissistic features. These features were shared by the different groups in the sense of how they interacted with others. Some individuals seemed more influenced by a narcissistic dynamic than others and may have had particular valencies. Still, the emotional climate that characterized this particular simulation can be called narcissistic, given the following observations.

Images that parties projected of themselves were of a grandiose and omnipotent nature. For example, parties assumed that they could prevent all unemployment or could guarantee touristic developments as if they were not subject to actions of others and large-scale developments that were clearly outlined in the simulation material. Parties portrayed themselves as powerful and important (e.g. a within-party conversation ran as follows: “If we do not do anything they will sail past us”, “Oh, that is nonsense, they cannot do anything without us”). It were the other parties that had a problem, not themselves (“You have a problem, not we”; a comment that was responded to with “No, you have a problem!”). Splitting was evident (as in seeing one’s own party as all good, while the others were seen as all bad.)

The quality of relating among parties was often aggressive and consisted of cynicisms (outsmarting one another over insignificant details, making jokes at the expense of others); there was bullying and direct attacks on one another (“Hey, you put us offside – I do not like that”, and as a response “Yes, but you are not constructive!”), demands were being made of one another and conversations could be quite forceful (“Actually, did you really HEAR what I said??”). Further, relationships were expected to be instrumental (parties easily stated what they wanted as a matter of fact, without being open to the desires of others or even exploring their wishes). A kind of assumption existed that the other was there for oneself. If the other appeared to be of no direct use, the other was told to leave the table (Local authority to the bank: “You have capital which you can and are allowed to invest, right?”. The bank: “That is an assumption”. The authority in turn: “Is that so? Then we can end our conversation now”). Although parties exhibited a lack of empathy toward other parties, they were oversensitive to what others did to them. The term narcissistic injury comes to mind when hearing their complaints regarding how unjustly treated they felt by others.

There was a clear tendency to see one’s own party as independent and to deny any possible interdependence. They played “hard to get” (“The question is whether we are dependent on the developments on the island at all”). Yet, parties did feel lonely, feared exclusion and were hurt when not noticed. At times, differences between themselves and others appeared to be negated, for example by talking on behalf of the other and also by being confused about their own identity and that of others. The reality of “difference” and “being in need of others” was clearly threatening.

Finally, it was striking how being in doubt was not possible. Participants tended to talk in terms of certainties only. They did not discuss what seemed impossible; the word “problem” was considered as something negative and had to be avoided. Perhaps not as a total surprise then, the simulation ended with a flight into fantasy. Rather than confronting their differences (in interests, identities and perspectives) and working with

their interdependencies, they collectively took a decision that was disastrous in relational (collusive) and socioeconomic terms (allowing the shipyard to go bankrupt thinking that tourism could compensate for the lay-offs, while totally denying the available data that clearly showed that touristic developments were very doubtful indeed, while the ship yard was potentially a very profitable business).

The dynamics depicted above did not arise in a social vacuum. Although the simulation often starts with win–lose dynamics, the extent of displayed narcissism and the strong “need to know” may be triggered by specific circumstances. In this case, the business school’s performance culture, its explicit ranking system and the competition (among schools and among students) it may induce may have created a setting in which narcissistic dynamics should not come as a surprise. A recent accreditation was very present in the school’s day-to-day conversations. Further, minutes before the simulation started, someone mentioned that 50 per cent of the students had failed an earlier exam, while one participant of the simulation introduced himself by publicly stating he had to do the simulation again, as he failed the whole course the year before. Performance anxieties were present from the very start.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this paper was to enrich the concept of group narcissism and illustrate how it may play a role in multiparty interactions. To this end, psychoanalytic, social psychological and systems-psychodynamic notions were introduced and an empirical illustration provided. Narcissism is conceived of as not only residing in individuals but as a dynamic that can characterize multiparty systems, operating in a particular context. The question can be raised how useful the concept of narcissism is when studying multiparty dynamics. Is it just another label? Is it translating existing concepts (e.g. social identity) into yet another one? Even worse, is it introducing reductionist language in a complex, multilevel and multifaceted domain? If not, what is the added value of thinking in terms of narcissism when it concerns system dynamics?

Promoting a reductionist label for something so complex as the dynamics of multiparty interactions would not be useful. I hope to have argued sufficiently that introducing the term narcissism in a multiparty context is not meant to psychologize, that is to reduce system dynamics to the behavior of individuals. What needs addressing is person-in-role in a particular context. Thinking in terms of narcissism helps understanding dynamics that result from regulating self-esteem by group members. Rather than staying with the generic term “win-lose”, it helps focusing attention on the underlying motives – conscious or unconscious – to exhibit win–lose behavior. The psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism adds to thinking in terms of social identity by arguing why it is to be seen not only as an independent variable but also as a dependent one, while it also helps unraveling the mechanisms of social identity construction, through notions of splitting, projection and projective identification.

In psychoanalytic thinking, one is more concerned with understanding the dynamics of narcissism and the function narcissistic features have in supporting a fragile identity or vulnerable self (Stolorow, 1975), rather than labeling someone as being high or low in narcissism. The quest is for finding out why and under what circumstances, individuals or particular groups exhibit a particular behavior that may be called narcissistic. One needs to explore the system to understand narcissistic behavior. Multiple system levels need to be considered simultaneously before one can conclude whether the narcissism

exhibited is an expression of the total system (acted out by one or more individuals), characterizes one or more particular parties (and their interrelationships) or concerns simply one narcissistically inclined individual. One needs to sort out. Often, at least more often than noticed, narcissistic individual behavior is an expression of a larger system dynamic or system climate. For example, narcissistic leaders are more likely to be appointed if organizations exhibit grandiose ambitions. If narcissistic behavior pertains to a system dynamic, replacing individuals will not suffice. The real question is – what function does it serve the system to have a particular role occupied by someone with a (in this case) narcissistic personality? Further, when a valency is rooted in a more narcissistic personality, change attempts directed at the individual may be not only insufficient (as it is a system characteristic), it may also be fruitless (as outspoken narcissism rooted in personality may be hard to change) as well as unethical (as one deals with dynamics in the workplace rather than individual therapy).

Comprehending the psychodynamic features of multiparty systems (narcissism or any other psychodynamic) as depicted above is more about “*verstehen*” rather than about “*erklären*”. Rather than studying the relationship between two variables while holding others constant (assuming this is possible), so characteristic of positivistic research, one aims to look at the total situation. The stance adopted is an interpretative one. Like in psychoanalysis, attention is paid to the language used, that what is not said, patterns of behavior, images that are evoked, etc. Rather than observing a system from a distance, systems-psychodynamic researchers want to be where the action is (mostly around the table where representatives meet) and be in touch with the emotional dynamics. As an (action) researcher, one also attends to one’s own inner world as one observes group members’ behavior. Listening to one’s own thoughts and feelings may be informative to find out what is going on in the system.

Such a stance is also taken when wanting to help the system to deal with its dynamics (Schruijer, 2013). As a process consultant, interventions regarding the group dynamics around the table can be made, while development-oriented (group or individual) interviews can be held that enable the interviewees to explore their own thoughts and emotions as well as explore those of the other parties and become aware of the larger system. Working conferences can be organized during which stakeholders can work on their collaborative tasks, while also attending to the here-and-now. Further, one may help the involved parties to learn to differentiate and relate the way we see ourselves (“*subject-us*”) and the way the others see us or the way we think the others see us (“*object-us*”) (Niers, 2014). These interventions are largely aimed at helping the stakeholders come to a shared understanding of the group dynamic issues that may be at play, help them to work these through and learn from them, and from there take joint action forward.

Adopting a systems-psychodynamic perspective requires that social scientists are able to think and act counterculturally, as the notion of (unconscious) group dynamics has practically disappeared from academia (Schruijer, 2012; Schruijer and Curseu, 2014). The same applies to psychoanalysis (Redmond and Shulman, 2008). As far as I have come to experience, the training of psychoanalysts is oriented only at working with individual patients. Social scientists on the one hand and psychoanalysts on the other could potentially add value to one another through collaboration. Unfortunately, they are worlds apart.

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