



Putting Narcissus on the Couch

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries
INSEAD, manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu

This article discusses the myth of Narcissus, one of the world's most famous tales which, from the dawn of Western civilization, has inspired countless artists and writers. His name has also been used to describe a major personality disorder: narcissism. Greek and Roman versions of the myth are presented with as purpose not only to shed greater light on this story but also to use the tale as a case example of arrested psychological development. Furthermore, due to his particular way of behaving, Narcissus has also been the namesake of a major personality disorder: narcissism.

While putting Narcissus on the couch, it is pointed out that the tragedy of his life is really a moral tale, warning that pride and self-obsession can bring about a cruel fate. It warns people not to become too enamored of themselves. In that respect, it explores the dynamics of narcissistic functioning as it features a person who had a dark enchantment cast over him, making him live in a trance-like, narcotic state. As the myth makes clear, Narcissus was unable to recognize his own face in the mirror of the pool because he didn't realize that the reflection was the mirror looking at himself. In the end, due to his impoverished mental state, he withered and died like the solitary flower that grew in his place, starved by his own isolated existence, plucked from the web of relations that truly could have marked out his place in the world.

The protagonist of the myth, a young man of exceptional personal attractiveness with a history of selfishness and disrespect for others, but troubled by arrested development, lost sight of the things that really matter. Consequently, given his developmental trajectory, he acquired a personality with very little emotional and cognitive depth. And to highlight this developmental outcome (apart from referring to narcissistic behavior), the article also explores the effects of intergenerational trauma (due to the psychological impact of rape), the impact of helicopter parenting, the curse of being too good looking, and the challenge of dealing with the separation/ individuation stage. In addition, what's also scrutinized in this article—given Narcissus developmental challenges—arrested development can lead to co-dependent behavior, problematic romantic, familial, and professional relationships, and difficulties with independent decision-making.

Keywords: Narcissus; Human Development; Narcissistic Behavior; Arrested Development; Rape; Intergenerational Trauma; Helicopter Parenting; The Curse of Beauty; Separation/ Individuation

Electronic copy available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4551785>

Working Paper is the author's intellectual property. It is intended as a means to promote research to interested readers. Its content should not be copied or hosted on any server without written permission from publications.fb@insead.edu

Find more INSEAD papers at <https://www.insead.edu/faculty-research/research>

Copyright © 2023 INSEAD

The more she followed, as when the flame flares upward from the sulfur on the torch. Oh, how she longed to make her passion known.

—Ovid

Narcissus does not fall in love with his reflection because it is beautiful, but because it is his. If it were his beauty that enthralled him, he would be set free in a few years by its fading.

—Wystan Hugh Auden

We are our memory, we are that chimerical museum of shifting shapes, that pile of broken mirrors.

—Jorge Luis Borges

The Myth

When it comes to storytelling, one of the world's most famous tales is the myth of Narcissus, which has inspired countless artists and writers from the dawn of Western civilization. Numerous frescoes depicting Narcissus have been found in ancient Pompeii; the theme has inspired painters as diverse as Caravaggio, Salvador Dali, and Lucien Freud; and novelists and poets, including Stendhal, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Oscar Wilde, Joseph Conrad, and Rainer Maria Rilke, have drawn on the myth in their work. The figure of Narcissus has featured in cinema, television, and music, and the mirroring process that is an essential part of the myth has intrigued artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Jan Van Eyck,

Diego Velázquez, Edouard Manet, and René Magritte. In addition, due to his behavior, Narcissus has become the namesake of a major personality disorder: narcissism.

There are Greek and Roman versions of the myth, which differ in some detail but are broadly similar. Both agree that Narcissus was the son of the river god Cephissus and the water nymph Liriope, probably conceived through rape. Soon after his birth, Narcissus' mother visited the blind seer Tiresias to ask about her son's future. Tiresias told her that he would have a long life provided "he never recognized himself," a reversal of the classic Greek ideal, "Know thyself," the words carved at the entrance of the temple in Delphi. This suggested impending doom but there were pragmatic ways to circumvent the prophecy. All Liriope needed to do was to banish mirrors and other reflective surfaces in which Narcissus could see himself.

The myth also tells us that Narcissus was extremely beautiful. In fact, he was supposed to be the most beautiful person who had ever lived. Both women and men fell in love with him on sight, yet he always responded to his suitors with disdain and contempt.

The Greek version of the myth recounted that one of the youth's most ardent admirers was a man called Ameinius. Narcissus rejected him, as he did all the others, but subsequently, and very coldheartedly, gave Ameinius a sword with which to commit suicide. As he died, Ameinius cursed Narcissus and asked the gods to punish him. His dying wish was heard by Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance and divine justice. According to the myth, Nemesis led Narcissus to a pool in which he saw his reflection for

the first time. He was so overcome by his own beauty that he was unable to stop looking at himself and eventually died in misery because he could not have what he most desired. His fixation with his image in the river Styx meant he was condemned to remain in the underworld forever.

However, the most popular version of the myth was told by the Roman poet Ovid in his book *Metamorphoses*, who introduced the figure of Echo to the story. The amorous pursuits of Zeus, the king of the gods, made his wife Hera extremely jealous. However, whenever Hera was about to catch Zeus transgressing, Echo was able to distract her attention. Eventually, Hera found out what had been happening and put a curse on Echo: she would never be able to speak for herself again, only repeat others' words. Ashamed, and struck dumb, Echo disappeared to live in a cave deep in the forest. Here, of course, she came across Narcissus and inevitably fell in love with him, but he repulsed her, like all his lovers. Echo ultimately pined away until only her voice remained but before she died, she called on the gods to curse Narcissus, who died from his self-love. Hoping to recover his body, Echo returned to the pool but in the place where Narcissus died, she could only find a sweet-smelling gold and white flower.

There is another later, and less popular, version of the myth, told by the Roman geographer Pausanias. In this version, it was not self-love that transfixed Narcissus but grief for his identical twin sister with whom he was in love. When she died, Narcissus would go to a spring, to look at himself and find some relief for his sorrow by imagining that he saw not his own reflection but his sister's likeness.

Moral Lessons

When all is said and done, like many other myths, the tragedy of Narcissus is really a moral tale that makes clear that pride and self-obsession always bring about a cruel fate.

The tale warns people not to become enamored of themselves. Clearly, Narcissus never took other people's feelings into account, it being the reason that narcissistic behavior is named after him. Other people seemed to be there for his self-aggrandizement, to make him feel important. Consequently, when a reflective trick was played on him, and he saw his own image, he didn't realize what he was really seeing. It seemed that he was looking at the only person who didn't fall for his charms. Conceivably, as that person did not react to him in the way he was used to, Narcissus became highly perturbed, making the prophecy of the blind seer Tiresias come true. Due to the lack of response from the image he saw, he ended up in depersonalized oblivion. Subsequently, to remind us of the danger of self-centeredness, the narcissus flower reappears every spring to warn us to keep our ego in check. Self-love comes before a fall.

The story of Narcissus has stood the test of time and its message is still relevant in our day-and-age. It continues to be a moral warning against becoming too self-centered. It tells us that when we allow vanity and arrogance to consume us, we can lose sight of the things that really matter. Paradoxically, by being too wrapped up in himself, Narcissus limited his potential as a human being and ended up an example of arrested development.

The myth also reminds us to be aware of the effects our actions can have on others. In that respect, it represents the “Golden Rule”: treat others as you want to be treated yourself. Learn to be empathic and compassionate. Narcissus showed no respect to his suitors or for their feelings.

Another lesson embedded in this tragic tale is to be cognizant of the emotional immaturity of youth. In all versions of the myth, Narcissus is described as a foolish and selfish young man. At this stage of life, it is common to be obsessed with appearances. In addition, another implicit message in the myth is that the young need to understand their role in the general scheme of things and that their actions will have consequences.

Putting Narcissus on the Couch

The richness of the myth of Narcissus on so many levels explain not only its enduring appeal as a cautionary tale but also its rewarding revelations when developmental theories are applied to the story. Imagine having Narcissus on the analyst’s couch. Here is a young man of exceptional personal attractiveness presenting us with a history of selfishness and disrespect for others, the inability to form relationships, and no obvious occupation. We discover that he is the child of rape; that he has an overprotective mother whose feelings towards him are highly ambivalent; that he is self-centered yet apparently lacking in self-awareness. What kind of personality disorders might be revealed during his analysis?

The legacy of rape

Was Narcissus a victim of circumstances? Being the result of rape is a terrible start in life. Rape is an aggressive act of power, dominance, and entitlement over another person, where there is no empathy or compassion for the victim. Narcissus' mother Liriope would have been profoundly affected by the experience and could have had a very ambivalent attitude towards her son.

The decision of a mother to raise a child conceived through rape presents serious psychological challenges.¹ The emotional trauma of sexual violence not only affects the mother; it can also lead to intergenerational trauma. During pregnancy, the mother might perceive the fetus as an alien invasion of her body. And the association of the child with the rape will affect her capacity to care for it. How the mother metabolizes the experience of rape could have a major influence on the child's emotional and social development, wellbeing, and long-term functioning.

Intergenerational trauma could be aggravated by the decision to tell the child about the rape. A child who knows it is the result of rape might feel responsible for its father's actions and develop strong feelings of shame and guilt. And the way the child will handle this information will greatly affect the development of its coping mechanisms and interpersonal relationships. It should come as no surprise that children conceived through rape can suffer from a range of psychological disorders, the most common ones being post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.

¹ Glorieuse Uwizeye, Holli A. DeVon, Linda L. McCreary, Crystal L. Patil, Zaneta M. Thayer, Julianne N. Rutherford (2022), Children born of genocidal rape: What do we know about their experiences and needs? *Special Issue: Global Public Health Nursing*, 39, Issue1, 350-359.

The mother's traumatic experience could be reinforced if the child, particularly a male child, physically resembles her rapist. For Liriope, who would have seen reminders of the rape and rapist in Narcissus' face, the prophecy that he would be safe as long as he "never recognized himself" could be highly significant. We could even ask whether the prophecy was directed primarily at Narcissus or his mother? Was Tiresias insinuating that Narcissus' appearance could make her relationship with him very difficult? Would she struggle to separate her positive feelings towards him from the terrible memory of the way he was conceived? Looking at him could trigger cause re-traumatization because of his similarity to the rapist.

Given the ambivalent feelings of the mother towards a child conceived through rape, the child's developmental path could be quite difficult. A mother might treat the child as a "child of the enemy" rather than a child that deserves to be loved. In addition, children born of rape could also have to face social stigma. They can be regarded as carriers of deviant genes. Often, they are ostracized by their families and communities. All these factors need to be considered in the context of the prophecy of Tiresias. It is likely that Narcissus' upbringing would have been very far from ordinary.

Apart from ambivalence his mother might experience about his appearance, Narcissus himself, when he saw his image in the pool, might be reminded of his father's face. Even if his mother had not told him about the way he was conceived, this confrontation with the self could have meant that he acquired knowledge of his origins. Tiresias might have

anticipated this risk when he told his mother that Narcissus should not look at himself. Not only should his mother try to forget the way Narcissus was conceived, but Tiresias might also have thought that it would be better for Narcissus not to know. Again, we can wonder about the implications for negative intergenerational impact.

Helicopter parenting

We are considering a myth, of course, so the way Liriope raised Narcissus can only be a matter of conjecture. We have no information about the family dynamics that might inform our psychological labor. This ancient myth has transported us to a magical world full of gods and goddesses and their complex interrelationships, while male-female relationships between mortals must also be considered in their contemporary context. Myths reflect the culture as it existed at a particular period in time.

However, whether mythical or actual, rape is a violent act that can have dramatic emotional consequences. It will inevitably affect the mother-child relationship and from a developmental perspective, it can have multiple outcomes.

Let's consider the practical impact of Tiresias' warning that Narcissus should never recognize himself. Preventing him from seeing his reflection was always going to be a challenge for Liriope, so it's not too much of a stretch to hypothesize that she might have been overprotective. However well-intentioned, an overprotective approach to childrearing always invites trouble and can have a serious developmental impact. If Liriope was a "helicopter" parent, Narcissus wouldn't be allowed to make his own

decisions and so wouldn't be able to make his own mistakes. Even though Liriope might have been trying to save Narcissus from possible harm, she was also depriving him of the ability to become a person in his own right. Her overprotective attitude would have hampered his social development, keep him from engaging in social situations, and restrict his opportunities to build friendships and learn social skills. The safety net his mother provided might have led Narcissus to develop an inflated sense of self, believing he was more capable than he really was. He would have become an attention-seeker, needing people to admire him. And even though all the versions of the myth describe Narcissus' arrogance, it would have been built on a very shaky foundation. Deep down, he may have realized that this sense of self-importance was built on quicksand. In truth, his upbringing meant that he was ill-equipped to deal with adversity in later life. In reality, he was a very fragile, insecure human being.

The burden of beauty

The young man on the analyst's couch was not only conceived through rape, doomed never to know himself and developmentally undermined by an overprotective mother—he was also the most beautiful person who had ever lived. But it would be wrong to see this as a countervailing blessing. Beauty can easily become a curse. If people are constantly being told how attractive they are, too much of their self-worth becomes tied to their appearance. As a result, they can begin to live in a bubble of blissful self-delusion. People tend to assume that beauty is accompanied by heightened competence and intelligence. They may project these misleading assumptions onto beautiful people. This makes it very difficult for beautiful people to develop a personality in their own right. And

from a sexual perspective, they might wonder what others really want from them: “Me or my body?”

Naturally, beautiful people want to be loved holistically but, sadly, their appearance often overshadows every other aspect of themselves. However, no amount of attractiveness can make up for a dysfunctional personality. Also—something that never happened to Narcissus—the aging process can be devastating for these people.

Obviously, a relationship with someone based solely on their looks is doomed to failure, adding yet another ominous angle to Tiresias’ prophecy—that appearances can be deceptive. The answer to the question of what lies beneath may well turn out to be “Nothing”. So, it is ironic that the way his mother raised him created exactly the conditions that made Narcissus so self-involved and simultaneously turned him into a person without substance. The only principle that seemed to govern his behavior was the question “How do I look?” And seeing the image of himself in the water only magnified his self-obsession, turning it into a deadly encounter.

Narcissus loved himself so much that he forgot to live, actually dying from selfishness. In that respect, he is the extreme example of the dangers of self-love without self-knowledge. He had no understanding of his own mental states—what he felt, thought, believed, or desired. He never learned to know himself. Familiar only with externalities, his own and others’ inner worlds were of no interest to him, leaving little or no room for other people.

The challenge of separation/individuation

The combination of being extremely good-looking and overprotected, together with the residual effects of their earliest origins, seems to make it very difficult for people like Narcissus to develop a personality of their own or to achieve true separation-individuation.² Narcissus' behavior can be interpreted as a reflexive turning towards the self. Given his self-centeredness, Narcissus never learned to relate meaningfully to others and his particular developmental trajectory produced a personality with very little emotional and cognitive depth.

As a result, Narcissus was emotionally crippled, addicted to admiration, and having no consideration for anyone but himself. If he had been able to explore his inner world, he would have obtained a modicum of self-knowledge and insight about many things that couldn't be seen on the surface. He would have been in touch with his feelings, thoughts, fantasies, desires, and values. He could have developed a sense of purpose in life. Above all, he would have acquired a strong sense of self and been able to create connections that would last. Yet these possibilities are also encompassed in Tiresias' prophecy—that any form of reflection—could it be self-reflection—would be deadly for Narcissus. Falling obsessively in love with his own image without recognizing himself spelled decline and death. But reflection leading to self-knowledge and self-consciousness would mean acquiring insight about himself and his origins and that could be unbearable: maybe

² Margaret Mahler, Fred Pine, and Annie Bergman, (1975). *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*, New York: Basic Books.

ignorance was a better option? The closer we look at the story of Narcissus, the more cursed he appears. Any form of reflection would represent a mortal danger to him.

Maturity and wellbeing

Let's remind ourselves of the myth to which we are applying this analysis. The theme of the story is narcissistic functioning, and it features a person who had a dark enchantment cast over him, making him live in a trance-like, narcotic state. His emotional and cognitive development had been stifled. The subject-object differentiation that's part of human development had been halted. Instead, Narcissus is completely wrapped up in himself. He never achieved true separation-individuation. Consequently, as a person without substance, the world he lived in was all about him. In fact, he seems to be a case of arrested development.

Separation-individuation is the name given to the process by which internal maps of the self and of others are formed.³ These experiential maps, or internal representations of self and others, are created through our earliest interactions with caregivers, from birth to the age of three. The process of individuation plays a crucial role in the life of every individual, from infancy into adulthood.

The ability to individuate—to become a person in one's own right—implies the ability to integrate frustrating and pleasurable aspects of experiences with other people. If

³ Margaret Mahler, Fred Pine, and Annie Bergman, (1975). *The psychological birth of the human infant*, New York: Basic Books.

successful, it contributes to the internalization of a stable sense of self. If time-appropriate separation from parents, peers, and other important individuals occurs, it creates a coherent, autonomous self. It enables a person to act independently and transform into an autonomous human being. In fact, only when we can differentiate will we be able to build healthy relationships with others. If we go through this developmental process satisfactorily, we will acquire self-acceptance, a sense of autonomy, environmental mastery, the ability to create positive relationships, a purpose in life, and the desire to strive for personal growth.

But individuation-separation is always a work in progress. The striving to become more autonomous never stops. Arrested development, however, can lead to co-dependent behavior, problematic romantic, familial, and professional relationships, and difficulties with independent decision-making. People who do not achieve individuation will also be troubled by a sense of aimlessness.

Looked at in terms of individuation-separation, the tragedy of Narcissus was his inability to go through this developmental process. He was unable to develop a secure identity and remained trapped in a loop of self-love. When he saw his reflection in the pool, he could not distinguish between himself and the other.

Even though Narcissus seemed irresistible to everybody and could have had his pick of lovers he remained blind to the richness and wonder of the real world. Due to his arrested development, he never realized his full potential. He ended up with only his ego for

company. Narcissus couldn't recognize his own face in the mirror of the pool because he didn't realize that the reflection was the mirror looking at himself. In the end, due to his impoverished mental state, he withered and died like the solitary flower that grew in his place, starved by his own isolated existence, plucked from the web of relations that truly could have marked out his place in the world. No one familiar with daffodils, and the way they flourish in masses, could miss the symbolism of this traditional ending of the myth.

Nevertheless, a daffodil remained. As one of the first flowers to bloom at the end of winter, daffodils announce the beginning of spring, signify the end of cold, dark days, and also symbolize rebirth and hope. Does this touch of hope allow us to imagine that as time passed, Narcissus would be able to stop looking at his image in the waters of the Styx, put his soul to rest, and begin anew?