

Cult Groups and the Narcissistic Personality: The Offer to Heal Defects in the Self

DANIEL KRIEGMAN, Ph.D.

LEONARD SOLOMON, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This study applies Kohut's self-psychology toward an understanding of the self-functions that membership in a religious cult group (Divine Light Mission) provides for the narcissistic personality. It is proposed that there exists a psychosocial fit between the appeal of the cult group's structure and process and the needs of the narcissistic personality. The cult group offers reparative and substitutive functions to the follower who seeks an idealized selfobject to stabilize a defective sense of self. The special relationship of the follower to the Guru bears a close resemblance to the "idealizing transference" which arises between certain narcissistic patients and their group therapist. The therapeutic use and misuse of the "idealizing transference" in group therapy is explored and suggestions are made for its appropriate clinical management.

THIS PAPER IS BASED, in part, on a clinical study of a group of

Dr. Kriegman is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Director of Supervision and Training. Massachusetts Treatment Center, Bridgewater. Massachusetts.

Dr. Solomon is Director, Group Therapy Program. Student Health Service and Professor of Psychology. Boston University. Boston. Massachusetts.

followers of the Guru Mahara Ji (GMJ), leader of the Divine Light Mission (Kriegman, 1980). A sample of GMJ followers and a control group were compared on a battery of clinical tests and clinical interviews.¹ The study sought to apply Kohut's self-psychology toward an understanding of the self-functions that membership in religious cult group may provide for the narcissistic personality disorder. The purpose of the present paper is to develop a descriptive model of the psychosocial fit between the narcissistic sector of the follower's personality and the appeal of the cult group's structure and process. In particular, we shall focus upon the reparative and substitutive self functions that the cult group offers to the individual who seeks to fill some defects in his self-development. The special appeal of the charismatic leader, the peer group pressure, and social control techniques are factors which serve to promote a certain degree of self-cohesion and to integrate the members' defective sense of self.

A study of cult group leadership style serves to illuminate the power of the "idealizing transference" in group development. Using the concepts derived from self-psychology (Kohut, 1971) we shall also explore the therapeutic use and misuse of the idealizing transference in group psychotherapy.

GROUP PROCESS AND IDEALIZATION

Idealization of the Group Leader: Classical Theory

The first explicit analysis of the intrapsychic importance of the followers' idealization of the group leader and the power of this attachment to bond the members together can be found in Freud's pioneering work on group psychology (1921). Freud focused mainly upon the relationship of the member to the leader. He viewed the relationship as one in which the member identified with the leader. One of the causes for this identification was the aim-inhibited sensual

¹The clinical battery included the Rorschach and modified TAT measures. The following is a brief summary of the significant findings. The Cult group scored significantly higher on projective tests designed to measure; (a) a tendency toward a fragmentation of self-experience; (b) narcissistic disturbance in relationships with formative selfobjects; (c) investment in objects that are of interest to the individual insofar as they enhance the subject's self-experience (selfobjects); and (d) general psychopathology.

love. This libidinal tie was understood to be essentially the same as that which occurs in the process of hypnosis. It leads to the same kind of idealization of the object of the libidinal cathexis as the aim-uninhibited state of being "in love." This idealized object is introjected and Freud (1921) concluded that "The object has taken the place of the ego-ideal." The relationship between members is then seen as ". . . a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego-ideal, and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego" (p. 116). Freud's early formulations are quite applicable to cult groups. The follower's attitude toward his Guru is one of identification and intense idealization. Freud's emphasis on the members' identification with and idealization of the leader is exemplified in the following grandiose description of the Guru Mahara Ji:

The brilliance of the stars in the sky is due to Shri Guru Mahara Ji alone. There is none other upon the earth who opens the heavens to man. There is none other enthroned in every heart. There is none other with power and great glory. We speak that which we have seen. Shri Guru Mahara Ji is a tree whose seed is everlasting joyous life . . . His is the glory of all truth and the liveliness of all life. He is bringing life to dead bodies. He is life (Cameron, 1973, p. 303).

The basis of the members' ties to one another lies within their mutual idealization of the Guru. They each strenuously attempt to attain a "total merger" with this idealized object. In Freud's terms, they introject the object into the ego-ideal. They then are heavily identified with each other and merged together as "lovers" of Guru Mahara Ji. In fact, they refer to themselves as premies (the Hindi word for "lovers") of Guru Mahara Ji.

Idealization of the Group Leader. Kohut's Contributions

Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977) has focused attention upon the extreme forms of idealization found in narcissistic personality disorders. Kohut proposes that this subgroup of patients, because of early traumatic disappointments in one or both parents, have not optimally internalized their selfobjects and thus suffer from structural defects in their personalities. In adult life, they attempt to remedy these defects in structure by seeking out new idealized objects with which to merge

and complete the self. This yearning to merge with a powerful figure has its origins in a developmental "fixation on the omnipotent object." The parallels between the particular type of transference which develops during the clinical treatment of narcissistic personality disorders and the idealization of the cult leader are so striking that, when one reads Kohut's descriptions of the "idealizing transference," it seems as though he might be describing the typical relationship between a cult member and his leader; for example, Guru Mahara Ji.

The *satsang* (the Hindi word meaning "company of truth") that the Guru followers deliver often focuses on the emptiness and depression which was the essence of their life before they found their Lord. Once they have become devotees of the Guru, this emptiness disappears to be replaced by the fulfilling experience of well-being and joy:

We've been wandering through these crazy times
Looking for some peace of mind
Searching for a love that will never die
But the faith we put in selfish feeling
Always left us not believing
Feeling our existence as a lie . . .
Guru Mahara Ji, you are my only light
You gave me direction the way is clear and bright
And I love you ... (Pring, King of Kings, © Shri Hans Music, 1976).

Note Kohut's description of the narcissistic personality disorder:

The patient will describe . . . pervasive feelings of emptiness, and depression which . . . are alleviated as soon as the narcissistic transference has become established—but which become intensified when the relationship to the analyst is disturbed (1971, p. 16).

The Genetic Roots of the Idealizing Transference

Kohut (1971) views the idealizing transference as a revival of an aspect of an early phase of development.

This phase . . . is the state in which, after being exposed to the disturbance of the psychological equilibrium of primary narcissism,

the psyche saves a part of the lost experience of global narcissistic perfection by assigning it to an archaic, rudimentary (transitional) object, the idealized parent imago. Since all bliss and power now reside in the idealized object, the child feels empty and powerless when he is separated from it and he attempts, therefore, to maintain a continuous union with it (p. 37).

The following description by a follower of the Guru Mahara Ji illustrates this archaic union with an "ideal object."

Guru Mahara Ji is pure and perfect. We can experience this purity and perfection only from the divine manifestation of the soul, the Perfect Master. When I understood that knowledge was the way I could be constantly connected to Him, both internally and externally, I begged for knowledge. And He gave that entrance into the kingdom of heaven (Cameron, 1973, pp. 114-115).

Thus, by attaching itself to the idealized parental imago the child is also able to maintain a sense of narcissistic perfection. By the use of this merger the child is able to ward off disabling negative experiences and in their place maintain a sense of well-being. During the course of development the child experiences disappointments in the idealized object. If this process is not overly traumatic the child will gradually withdraw the narcissistic cathexes from the idealized object and internalize them. That is to say, the child will gradually build up internal structures which will then carry out the all-important function which the idealized selfobject had previously carried out.

WHAT THE NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY SEEKS

The Need for an Idealized Object

Disturbances in the relationship between the developing self and the selfobjects during the patient's childhood interfere with the completion of a developmental sequence, which includes (1) a merger with the parent ideal; and (2) a de-idealization of the idealized omnipotent selfobject; and (3) a gradual building of internal structures which carry on the function of the archaic selfobject relationship to the idealized parent. Kohut (1977) has referred to the "Zeigarnik Effect" to explain the narcissistic patient's repetitive

reactivation of a specific uncompleted developmental task in the transference. By means of idealizing selfobject transferences (in the analytic situation), the narcissistic patient is attempting to complete himself. The apparent superiority, perfection, and goodness of the (leader) analyst arouses the patient's admiration. It also stimulates hopes for union with the analyst/leader and support for the grandiose pole of the self.

Specific traumas, however (such as a sudden, unexpected, intolerable disappointment in the idealized object at this phase) . . . (leads to an insufficient idealization of the super-ego. . . . Persons who have suffered such traumas are (as adolescents and adults) forever attempting to achieve a union with the idealized object since, in view of their specific structural defect (insufficient idealization of their super-ego), their narcissistic equilibrium is safeguarded only through the interest, the responses, and the approval of present-day (i.e., currently active) replicas of the traumatically lost selfobject (Kohut, 1971, p. 55).

One follower who expresses this position states the following about the Guru Mahara Ji:

For one month, he gave me so much love, and never saw the bad in me, only drew out the good and made me able to see some good again, and laugh and feel his enormous love . . . Holy Mother and the divine brothers of Guru Mahara Ji gave me so much love that I knew only one thing, that I had found my destination, and that I wanted only to be with them forever (Cameron, 1973, p. 116).

Keeping in mind the special relationship between the follower and the Guru, note what Kohut (1971) stipulates regarding the traumatic disappointment in the idealized object which can lead to failure of this gradual process of internalization.

If the child does not acquire the needed psychic structure, his psyche remains fixated on an archaic self-object, and the personality will throughout life be dependent on certain objects in what seems to be an intense form of object hunger. The intensity of the search for and of the dependency on these objects is due to the fact that they are striven for as a substitute for the missing segments of the psychic structure. They are not objects (in the psychological sense

of the term) since they are not loved or admired for their attributes, and the actual features of their personalities, and their actions, are only dimly recognized (pp. 45-16).

When the superego consists not so much of conscious ego-ideals but of unconscious archaic fantasies about parents of superhuman size, emulation becomes almost entirely unconscious and expresses not the search for models to identify with but the emptiness of self-images. The narcissistic personality is incapable of true identification with parents; a process in which self-structures are internalized. Instead he searches for an external selfobject to idealize for he lacks the confidence in his own abilities that would enable him to model himself after another person's admired example. He then seeks to "worship" an idealized selfobject which does not result in the development of internal self-structure.

The Need for a "Twinship Merger": The Peer Selfobject

Self-psychology has emphasized the developmental need for self-affirming parental selfobjects in order for healthy self-structures to form. Kohut has also described the "twinship merger" as one of the varieties of early selfobject relationships and analytic transferences (1971). In the course of normal development, the child also receives powerful self-affirming "mirror" experiences via identification and "twinship mergers" with siblings, close friends, and peer groups as well as with parents. Research studies in developmental psychology reveal that peer relationships become significant for the emotional life of the child as early as the "toddler phase," namely, 18 months to 3 years of age (Mueller and Lukas, 1975; Grunebaum and Solomon, 1980, 1982). Grotstein (1982) states:

I believe that the peer group—twinship—sibship alternative to the Oedipus is a most potent aspect of childhood life which comes to fruition in adolescence and adulthood as attachments to older generations are abandoned for attachments to members of one's own generation (p. 79).

Kohut and Wolf (1978) describe the special character of this merger with an alter ego (or an idealized selfobject) for the narcissistic personality:

... the fluidity of the boundaries between then and others interferes with their ability to discriminate their own thoughts, wishes, and intentions from those of the self-object. Because they experience the other as their own self, they feel intolerant of his independence: They are very sensitive to separations from him and they demand—indeed they expect without question—the self-object's continuous presence (p. 422).

The Need for a Set of Meaningful Goals and Values

It is from the internalization of the idealized aspects of the oedipal objects that

... the specific and characteristic aura of absolute perfection of the values and standards of the superego are derived; and the omniscience and might of the whole structure are also due to the fact that it is partly invested with narcissistic, idealizing libido (Kohut, 1971, p. 41).

A person's idealized values provide a basic sense that one's life has purpose and meaning. This includes some moral imperatives separating right from wrong (a sense of justice), heroic imagos, and idealized goals. This crucial aspect of self-functioning enables a person to mobilize energy in the pursuit of one's goals and to generate the experience of zest and joy in work, activities, and relationships. In some persons, the "characteristic aura of absolute perfection ... the omniscience and might" are missing from the ego ideals due to a failure to internalize the narcissistic cathexes which were formerly invested in the idealized selfobject. Thus, energy is not available to feed and maintain strongly established and well-defined self-structures. The individual is thus incapable of independently sustaining these self-functions without reliance upon "external" selfobjects. The result is a personality which when functioning independently (without a selfobject relationship) lacks a clearcut sense of personal morality as well as a sense of direction or purpose in life. These are not the symptoms of an unresolved neurotic conflict but rather those of a narcissistic personality: a lack of zest, joy, purpose, and meaning in life. The cult's offering of a merger suggests that those who respond are suffering from a defective self-experience which can be ameliorated by a merger

with the group and a surrender of the validity of one's own self-experience. Kohut (1971) provides the following clinical description of a patient with a self-deficit in the idealizing pole of the self.

What he lacked ... was the ability to feel more than a fleeting sense of satisfaction when living up to his standards or reaching his goals. He was able to obtain a sense of heightened self-esteem only by attaching himself to strong admired figures whose acceptance he craved and by whom he needed to feel supported (p. 62).

The specific transference that develops indicates the nature of the selfobject functions for a person with deficits in the idealizing pole of the self. Kohut (1971) in discussing such a patient notes the following:

Thus, in the transference manifestations of his specific structural defect he seemed insatiable in two (tyrannically and sadistically asserted) demands that he directed toward the idealized analyst: (a) that the analyst share the patient's values, goals, and standards (and thus imbue them with significance through their idealization; and (b) that the analyst confirm ... that the patient had lived up to his values and standards. ... Without the analyst's expression of his empathic comprehension of these needs ... , the patient's values and goals seemed trite and uninspiring to him and his successes were meaningless and left him feeling depressed and empty (p. 62).

WHAT THE CULT GROUP OFFERS THE SEEKER

Potential converts to the GMJ (and other religious cult groups) have a profile of narcissistic characteristics which render them particularly susceptible to the proselytizing approach of GMJ. The leadership structure and group dynamics of the cult functions in such a way as to offer to soothe and repair the sort of narcissistic deficits described by Kohut. The cult group aligns itself with the habitual adaptive mode of the narcissistic individual—it fits and complements his defects in personality structure. A close examination of the specific types of appeals that the GMJ followers use suggests a striking "psychosocial fit" between what the narcissistic personality yearns for and what the cult offers. Table 1 provides a summary

version of the dimensions of psychosocial fit between the GMJ group and its potential followers.

1. *The Offer of a Charismatic Leader: An Idealized Object*

The most important offering the GMJ makes to the potential convert is the charismatic leader the follower can identify with and idealize. GMJ followers often speak of "his physical presence." This exact phrase is often used by GMJ followers as if it were a magical incantation, for there is nothing like "his physical presence." The followers of Guru Mahara Ji have a special Hindi name for it, *darshan*—the physical exhilaration which one experiences when in the presence of the Guru. This is described by a follower in the following statement:

Case #2 God, the giver of life, Mahara Ji has shown me what I really am, because I am not an architect or an urban planner: I am a more beautiful manifestation. When I come in contact with that energy, that love that I feel inside I recognize that that is what I am, then I am fulfilled, satisfied and I recognize that experience more intensely when I am in the presence of Mahara Ji. That is my only goal, my only interest, just to feel that (Kriegman, 1980, p. 189).

Note Freud's (1921) observations:

It is well known how easily erotic wishes develop out of emotional relations of a friendly character, based upon appreciation and admiration between a master and a pupil, between a performer and a listener. In fact, the growth of emotional ties of this kind . . . provides a much frequented pathway to sexual object-choice . . . even an intense religious tie can revert to ardent sexual excitement. . . . even an affectionate devotee, even a friend or an admirer, desires the physical proximity and the sight of the person who is now loved only in the "Pauline" sense (pp. 138-139).

In these passages Freud sought to indicate how, what appears to be a completely nonsensual love or devotion, still retains some of the libidinal character of sexual love. Indeed, in its purest forms, *darshan* takes on obvious sexual overtones.

TABLE 1: The Psychosocial Fit Between What the Cult Offers and the Needs of the Narcissistic Personality

What the Cult Offers to Potential Converts	What the Narcissistic Personality Seeks
1. A charismatic leader to merge with and idealize.	1. Merger with an idealized object. Self-support and affirmation via a selfobject transference.
2. Sibship/peer group support and cohesion.	2. Twinship merger and "mirroring." Self-support and affirmation via twinship transference.
3. Alleviation of all emotional distress; e.g., feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.	3. Relief from fluctuations in self-esteem and fragmentation of the sense of self. This is experienced via symptoms of depression, hypochondriacal concerns, ennui, and loneliness.
4. Membership in an elite, special group.	4. Group support and validation for a grandiose self which masks shame and inferiority.
5. Total equality with sibs/peers under the loving and idealized leader.	5. Relief from the painful affects of intense envy, jealousy, and narcissistic rage.
6. A new belief system, set of values, and purposes in life. Offer to fill up one's empty life.	6. Relief from emptiness, valuelessness, loss of goals, and anomie. A "curative fantasy" leading to a restoration of the self.

However, the attachment is more than sexual or libidinal. The Guru serves a more important function as the central focus of the follower's entire existence.

... But mostly He showed me that I am nothing without Guru Mahara Ji and allowed me to devote my whole life to Him (Cameron, 1973, pp. 195-196).

This leader-focused existence is found in other cult groups and is particularly characteristic of the idealizations which characterize the object-relations of certain narcissistic personality disorders.

2. *The Offer of a Twinship Merger: The Elimination of the Experience of the Defective Self*

There is a continuous round of peer group meetings for all the premies (lovers). During a *satsang* (company of truth) premies get together with each other ostensibly to share their innermost thoughts and feelings, completely without guile. Such pseudointimacy, in the context of achieving true knowledge of God, obliterates ego boundaries and promotes a "twinship merger." Another important aspect of the peer group activities is the mirroring of praise and caring toward each other and the constant reinforcement of the new belief system. The recruits' comments are treated as revelations and peer reactions are unqualified in their approval. This type of approval devalues the functioning of an independent observing ego.

The clinical observer is struck by the salience of visual gazes and "knowing smiles" which pervade their interaction. Clinical interviews reveal that these tacit visual messages represent the recruits' sense that "we are the enlightened few who are among the first to be aware of the advent of the Lord." The notion of a selfobject function being served by a twinship merger adds another dimension to our understanding of the value (to the follower) of being identified with other members. Freud (1921) viewed identification with other members as a byproduct of replacing one's ego-ideal with that of the leader. The viewpoint of self psychology suggests that the twinship merger has a concomitant selfobject function. As a cult member, the narcissistic person seeks a twinship merger (and selfobject) as an end in itself. The twinship merger, via peer support, mirroring, and acceptance serves a reparative function for the self-system. It provides the recruit with a sense of self-affirmation and well-being.

3. *The Offer to Alleviate Emotional Distress and the Sense of Emptiness*

The GMJ offers to alleviate the potential convert's personal distress and to enable him to experience continuous ecstatic well-being. In the standard proselytizing procedure members tell stories about their former lives and how miserable and inadequate they were in contrast to their life as a premie. Notwithstanding the possibility that the stories are greatly exaggerated, the changes and sense of relief which are reported remain impressive. Indeed, in some cases actual dramatic improvements do occur. In one series of controlled studies, Galante (1982) measured the psychological impact of conversion to the Divine Light Mission (GMJ). Structured self-reports of these members indicated a substantial amelioration of emotional distress (a "relief effect") upon joining.

Freud's (1921) conceptualization of this process is that the libido bound up in the neuroses must be transferred to the leader (or rather, the mental representation of the leader), if there is a strong impetus to group formation. Freud was writing about neurotic symptoms whereas the GMJ offers relief from a general feeling of emptiness, meaninglessness, ennui, and depression. These are precisely the symptoms of the narcissistic personality disorder (Kohut 1971, 1977).

4. *The Offer of Membership in an Elite*

Another characteristic of cults is the way in which they set themselves apart from outsiders. The members have something special about them. This offer of grandiosity would be likely to appeal to those suffering from feelings of shame and inferiority which further supports an emerging picture of a narcissistic defect.

By dividing the world in this absolutist manner the GMJ group appeals to those recruits whose own defensive processes rely heavily upon "splitting." The excessive use of the defense mechanism of

splitting is characteristic of borderline and narcissistic disorders (Kernberg, 1975).²

5. *The Offer of Equality with Peers*

While the cult group offers its members intergroup superiority with a membership in a chosen elite, it also offers intragroup equality. While this serves the group's need for harmony and relatively conflict-free internal functioning, it simultaneously offers a complementary solution to the elitism which is a partial solution to the member's sense of shame and inferiority. These are two ways of alleviating the pain of a defective, inferior sense of self: (1) by steadfastly maintaining one's grandiose superiority (the intergroup solution); and by (2) steadfastly maintaining a sense of total equality (the intragroup solution). Kohut (1976) notes the relationship between the idealization of the group leader and the maintenance of a uniform sense of equality among the members. This dynamic can be observed in many different types of groups. In this case Kohut is examining a group to which he belongs, the psychoanalytic community.

. . . The idealization of a group model protects the individual member of the group against certain states of narcissistic disequilibrium which are experienced as envy, jealousy and rage. If these narcissistic tensions remain undischarged, they are exquisitely painful . . . [if the imago of the leader] . . . has been securely included in the member's idealized superego and has thus become a part of the self, then he can disregard contemporary competitors, they are not a threat to his own narcissistic security, and he can avoid suffering the painful narcissistic injuries which the comparison with the actual rivals for the goals of his narcissistic strivings might inflict on him (p. 389).

²The GMJ ideology promotes a view of the world as divided into two camps: the "ordinary" masses as compared with the "chosen and special followers of GMJ. Such images appeal to those recruits whose sense of shame and inferiority are an integral part of their narcissistic defect. By contrast the ideology of such cult groups as the "Moonies" or Scientologists promotes a view of the world divided in terms of "good" or "evil"—those who favor God versus Satan. As Hoffer (1951) points out, for such groups the strength of their movement "is proportionate to the vividness and tangibility of its devil" (p. 86). Such images may appeal to recruits who rely upon more primitive paranoid defenses to cope with their anxiety (Olson, 1980).

Deutsch (1975) in describing (Baba) the leader of a "sidewalk Ashram" (a small cult which met in a park) notes the delicate balance between rivalry for a special relationship with the leader and the wish to have everyone treated equally by the leader.

Baba usually radiated acceptance and good humor and created an atmosphere of warmth that the family basked in. Family members would often embrace each other joyously but generally all attention was focused on Baba. Members receiving Baba's attention in the form of an inquiry as to their well-being or an offer of a flower or a fruit would experience extreme gratification. Conversely in the early weeks of the Ashram, a few felt jealous and rejected and thought the leader played favorites. These latter feelings tended to disappear as these individuals became convinced of Baba's evenhandedness and, moreover, attempted to follow his teachings concerning the "letting go" of all desire (p. 167).

6. *The Offer to Restore a Sense of Personal values and Meaning in Life*

The GMJ cult leaders emphasize the aimless wandering and meaningless actions which had characterized their lives prior to their discovery of the Guru. The proselytizer's words entice the seeker by reassuring him that the speaker's emptiness is now all gone—he has been filled up with GMJ's love. The songs sung at these *satsang* sessions also illustrate this theme of filling up the seeker's internal void.

You gave me direction
The way is clear and bright
You filled my life with a sense of purpose.

Thus the leader (external selfobject) has taken over the psychic functions (idealizing pole of the self) which would otherwise be carried out by an internal structure. Other examples of this process are drawn from clinical interviews of GMJ recruits.

Case #5 My activities . . . are all pointed to (one goal: to become more and more in tune with the wishes and direction of Guru Mahara Ji so that I can be as much as possible at his disposal in this world and to become more and more open and receptive to

the incredible love that He is always offering me. This pair of goals are actually one and can be realized in surrendering the reins of my life to the Superior Power that Mahara Ji is (Kriegman, 1980, p. 191).

Case #10 I'm dedicating my life to Guru Mahara Ji because that's how the experience of life—a love, a peace, a power beyond words—is completely realized, understood, felt and utilized. It is my experience that loving and serving Guru Mahara Ji is the purpose of life—is the highest, ultimate thing in the universe (Kriegman, 1980, p. 192).

The notion of a psychosocial fit between the cult group and the narcissistic seeker suggests that the GMJ offers a particular kind of resolution for the painful experience of self-fragmentation in the narcissistic seeker. It is as if the GMJ and the narcissistic seeker are in collusion; the cult group provides a merger experience and selfobject which will fulfill the longings for self-cohesion in the seeker.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GROUP PSYCHOIHERAPY

The Misuse and/or Exploitation of the Idealizing Transference

The special relationship between the follower and the Guru bears a striking resemblance to the idealizing transference which arises between certain narcissistic patients and their therapist. Kohut (1971) notes:

... the relationship of the true believer to his God . . . in which the figure of the perfect and omnipotent God, with whom the powerless and humble believer wants to merge, corresponds to the ancient omnipotent self-object, the idealized parent imago (p. 106).

Within the therapeutic relationship, Kohut has cautioned against "the active encouragement of an idealization of the analyst" because it "leads to the establishment of a tenacious transference bondage. . ." He then quotes Freud's warning (Freud, 1923, p. 50) about the existence of:

"a temptation for the analyst to play the part of prophet, savior,

and redeemer to the patient," i.e., to encourage the patient to put the analyst "in the place of his ego ideal," a procedure to which "the rules of analysis are diametrically opposed" (Kohut, 1971, p. 164).

The cult group techniques of recruitment and "conversion" are designed to exploit the formation of an idealized transference in which the convert becomes merged with the "omnipotent" leader. The leader acts out the role of "savior and redeemer." His goal is to maintain interminably the follower's symbiotic attachment to the leader.

The "Cult-Creating" Psychotherapist

Temerlin and Temerlin (1982) have recently documented the way in which certain narcissistic psychotherapists misuse the "idealizing transference" and develop cult-style groups. These therapists failed to maintain professional boundaries with their patients. They treated their friends, students, lovers, relatives, and employees and brought them together to develop compact, psychologically incestuous groups of which they were the leader. Temerlin and Temerlin note the following:

These therapists did not consider their patient's idealization of them to be a transference, to be understood as part of the treatment, but used it to encourage submission, obedience, and adoration as in religious cults. Patients became "True Believers" with totalistic patterns of thought, increased dependence and paranoia. Both therapist and patients became trapped in a closed system . . . (p. 131).

Patients became part of the therapists' "family." They became "siblings" who bonded together to admire and support their common therapist. Differences with one's leader-therapist were akin to disloyalty; steps toward individuation were interpreted as rebellion.

Temerlin and Temerlin continue:

Only after leaving the cult did many patients realize they unconsciously had lived out a fantasy of having found a "magical healer," a Personal Savior, or of pleasing an omnipotent parent. . . . Therapists perpetually acted out such fantasies by accepting

idealization as a *deserved status*; gratifying infantile needs of patients ... [and confiding that] they befriended only those patients with the potential for greatness (p. 135).

Temerlin and Temerlin conclude that when transferences and countertransferences cannot be clarified, and when reality testing is limited because of (1) isolation of the group; (2) fusion with the leader; (3) mixed role relationships ("psychological incest"); and (4) the externalization of hostility, then ego deterioration is likely to occur in the members.

The Narcissistic Personality as Leader

What is the character of such narcissistic leaders of cult-style groups? Volkan notes that the narcissistic group leader must create a "fit" between himself and the group to protect the cohesion and stability of his grandiose self and to avoid feeling threatened. Volkan (1980) states:

In the group, he maintains the illusion of his preeminence by a devastating devaluation of everyone else or by gathering real and fantasied admirers around himself. . . in their relentless search for power they use other people discarding them ... whenever it seems advantageous (p. 136).

Volkan emphasizes that the narcissistic group therapist will develop a therapeutic process which "feeds his own self-esteem at his patients' expense . . . and they do not identify themselves with their patients' welfare" (p. 151). In Kohut's terms such therapists engage in psychotherapeutic work in search of support for a grandiose self in order to cover a sense of inferiority or depression. The narcissistic leader has little investment in seeing the group members attain a higher level of self-sufficiency and autonomy. The narcissistic leader is "in the business" of using the group's admiration in support of his grandiose self.

Yalom and Lieberman (1971) have described a "charismatic type" of encounter group leader who is associated with a disproportionately large percentage of "psychological casualties" when compared with other types of leaders. They propose that these "casualties" are ". . . truly caused, not merely hastened or facilitated by leadership style"

(p. 28). This "charismatic" style of leadership is suffused with narcissistic components. Such leaders are described as being high in charisma, intrusive and aggressively stimulating, highly challenging and confrontative with each member, and exerting a high degree of authoritarian control. They state:

Individuals who are psychologically vulnerable and who overinvest their hopes in the magic of salvation of encounter groups are particularly vulnerable when they interact with leaders who believe that they can offer deliverance. Such an interaction is a potent synergistic force for destructive outcome (p. 28).

This type of "charismatic leader" would appear to be using the group in the service of supporting his own grandiose self.

The Idealizing Transference in Group Psychotherapy

In addition to classical analytic group concepts it is important that the group therapist be attuned to the activation of narcissistic strivings in all group therapy settings (Harwood, 1983). These will take the following transference forms: (1) a desire and tendency to utilize the leader and/or group as an idealized selfobject; (2) a desire and tendency to utilize the leader and/or group as a mirroring selfobject. The leader should also be aware of the negative reaction formation versions of these transference tendencies: for example, Mr. A. who consistently denigrates the leader and the group saying "I am here to prove that therapy cannot work . . . then I will have tried everything." Subsequent work reveals that Mr. A. struggles with his need to idealize the leader. He feels that if he "gives in" to his desire to merge with (worship) the powerful leader his weak sense of self will "disappear" or be "swallowed tip" by such a merger.

In Harwood's (1983) application of self psychology to group psychotherapy, he proposes that

an enfeebled or fragmented self . . . may repress any lingering remnants of a real nuclear self in order to merge with a seemingly all-powerful, authoritarian, tyrannical image, and thus settle for the emergence of a false self living under the illusion of borrowed strength (p. 186).

Though the other "transference" tendencies are present in the cult

(and psychotherapy) groups, the exaggerated form in which the idealization of the leader appears in the GMJ cult group makes us fully aware of the enormous power this can bring to bear in groups. Kohut and Wolf (1978) warn that "group pressure diminishes individuality; it leads to primitivization of the mental processes" (p. 839). This is coupled with a tendency to search for, identify, and idealize a leader. Fenichel (1945) emphasizes that this yearning for an idealized parental figure is universal.

Every human being has a dim recollection that there were once powerful or, as it must seem to him, on omnipotent beings whose help, comfort, and protection he could depend on in time of need . . . He longs for just such omnipotent protection and comfort as were at his disposal in childhood (p. 491).

When, in addition, the members of a group suffer from narcissistic defects, this tendency may be even more pronounced. Such narcissistic members enter a group actively yearning and searching for a "reparative" grandiose leader (Volkan, 1980).

Even if the group therapist does little or nothing to enhance the group's perception of him as "larger than life" or as "ideally healthy," that tendency will be present from the beginning for the members are "patients" and the leader is a "healer." Failure to live up to such an ideal may lead to anger, disappointment, and/or withdrawal. On the other hand, every empathic success (without any tendency to manipulate the group) almost invariably leads to an enhancement of the idealization of the leader. Group psychotherapy presents a potent context for the development of idealizing transferences and, thus, poses special countertransference problems for the group leader.

Countertransference Problems with the Idealizing Transference

Kohut (1971) has described the specific counter transference themes which confront the analyst treating narcissistic patients who develop idealizing transferences. Parallels can be drawn to group psychotherapy where group tendencies to idealize the leader are likely to stir up specific countertransference problems. The leader's countertransference issues are seen as rooted in his unresolved narcissistic development during which the grandiose self had not been fully incorporated into a vital cohesive self. One form of

countertransference comes into play when stimulation of the leader's grandiosity results in a threat to the stability of the therapist's sense of self. The uncomfortable stimulation of the therapist's unresolved grandiosity can lead the therapist to interfere with the formation of an idealizing transference. For example, the therapist may interfere by correcting a member's unrealistic idealizations or by being overly friendly in an attempt to create a nonthreatening egalitarian group climate.

The Therapeutic Use of the Idealizing Transference

In the context of psychoanalytic treatment Kohut (1971) describes the appropriate clinical stance in the management of an idealizing transference.

... during those phases of the analysis of narcissistic character disturbance when an idealizing transference begins to germinate, there is only one correct analytic attitude: to accept the admiration (p. 264).

It is necessary to allow the idealizing transference to fully develop before it can be brought to the attention of the group members in an empathic manner. If the leader is able to "accept the admiration" and help the patients make genetic reconstructions, the result can be a healing of a split within the members' psyches as they learn to noncritically accept their need to find and attach themselves to idealized selfobjects.

As an increased understanding of these feelings develops, the group members will be able to see the leader more clearly. The members will be better able to tolerate the leader's errors and empathic failures. They will have less of a need to attack the leader, withdraw, deny the failing, or engage in some other behavior which wards off fragmentation. They will be better able to utilize their new insight as an integral part of developing self-structures. Gradually, the non-traumatic awareness of the leader's limitations will aid the members in completing an arrested developmental process. This process occurs through the withdrawal of narcissistic libido from the idealized leader. Transmuting internalizations may occur in which new and healthier self-structures can form.

CONCLUSIONS

Cult groups have developed leadership styles, totalistic belief systems, peer group life, and a rhythm of activities for new recruits in such a manner that there exists a psychosocial fit between what the cult group offers and what the narcissistic personality seeks. The narcissistic personality yearns for a merger with an idealized selfobject or with an alter ego, and requires selfobjects in order to complete a defect in self-structure and feel better. The cult group offers reparative functions to those recruits who suffer from major defects in the narcissistic sphere of their personality.

We suggest that significant narcissistic pathology will be present in most psychotherapy groups. This usually results in a tendency for the group to struggle with the development of an idealizing transference with specific related countertransference themes. Suggestions for the clinical management and the therapeutic use of the idealized transference in groups as well as the dangers of its misuse and exploitation were explored.

REFERENCES

- Cameron, C. (1973), *Who Is Guru Mahara Ji?* New York: Bantam Books.
- Deutsch, A. (1975), Observations of a sidewalk ashram. *Arch. Gen. Psychiat.*, 32, 166-175.
- Fenichel, O. (1945), *The Psychoanalytic Theory of the Neurosis*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Freud, S. (1921), Group psychology and the analysis of the ego. *Standard Edition*, 18. London: Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 67-143.
- (1923), The Ego and the Id. *Standard Edition*, 19. London: Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 3-66.
- Galanter, M. (1982), Charismatic religious sects and psychiatry: An overview. *Amer. J. Psychiat.*, 139, 1539-1548.
- Grotstein, J.S. (1982), Newer perspectives in object relations theory. *Contemp. Psychoan.* 18, 1, 43-91.
- Grunebaum, H., & Solomon, L. (1980), Toward a peer theory of group psychotherapy, I: On the developmental significance of peers and play. *This Journal*, 30, 1, 23-49.

- (1982), Toward a theory of peer relationships, II: On the stages of social development and their relationship to group psychotherapy. *This Journal*, 32, 3, 283-307.
- Harwood, I. II. (1983), The application of self psychology concepts to group psychology. *This Journal*, 33, 469-487.
- Hoffer, E. (1951), *The True Believer*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Kernberg, O.F. (1975), *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Kohut, H. (1971), *The Analysis of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
- (1976), Creativeness, charisma, and group psychology. In: *The Search the Self*, Vol. 2, ed. P. Ornstein. New York: International Universities Press.
- (1977), *The Restoration of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
- & Wolf, E.S. (1978), The disorders of the self and their treatment. *Internat. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 59, 413-425.
- Kriegman, D. (1980), *A Psychosocial Study of Religious Cults from the Perspective of Self Psychology*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms.
- Mueller, E., & Lukas, J. (1975). Developmental analysis of peer interaction among toddlers. In: *Friendship and Peer Relations*, ed. M. Lewis & L. Rosenblum. New York: Wiley Interscience.
- Olson, P.A. (1980), Adolescent involvement with the supernatural and cults: Some psychoanalytic considerations. *Ann. Psychoan.*, 8, 171-196.
- Pring, S. (1976), King of Kings. In: *The Lord of the Universe*, Anand Band. New York: BMI Recording, Shri Hans Music Co.
- Temerlin, M.K., & Temerlin, J.W. (1982), Psychotherapy cults: An iatrogenic perversion. *Psychother. Theory, Res. & Pract.*, 19, 2, 131-141.
- Volkan, V.D. (1980), Narcissistic personality organization and reparative leadership. *This Journal*, 33, 469-487.
- Yalom, I.D., & Lieberman, M.A. (1971), A study of encounter group casualties. *Arch. Gen. Psychiat.*, 25, 16-30.

Dr. Kriegman's address:

20 Dorcar Road
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02467