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The Narcissistic Researcher: A Personal View

by Martha J. Laughlin

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A psychiatrist defines the narcissist as someone who is unable to see the world through an objective lens of reality. Lowen (1985), describes narcissists as "egotists, focused on their own interests but lacking the true values of the self-- namely, self-expression, self-possession, dignity, and integrity" (p. ix). While the non-narcissistic person is able to make a clear separation between what involves self and what does not, the narcissist sees the world only as it is filtered through his own "self-centered" lens. *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1988) offers a layperson's definition of narcissism as "a consuming, self-absorption or self-love; a type of egotism. Narcissists constantly assess their appearance, desires, feelings, and abilities" (p. 403).

Okay, everybody agrees that narcissism is some degree of self-interest and that it is bad. So, what is the problem? And what does narcissism have to do with research?

If the concept of narcissism were limited to the domain of psychoanalytic nosology probably there would not be a problem. But such is not the case. At the beginning of life a child is exhorted not to be selfish but to "consider other people besides just yourself" and to "share". Adolescents are scolded to "think about somebody else's feelings for a change". Children and adults alike are recriminated for sins of self-importance or self-centeredness: "All you ever do is think about yourself!" or "Not everybody thinks the way you do", and the dreaded pronouncement of self-love: "You are so egotistical!" We are instilled with those virtues that commonly stand as opposites to narcissism: generosity, self-sacrifice, self-effacement, altruism and objectivity.

The problem is that the "natural" qualitative researcher in each of us is trained out. We have successfully persuaded ourselves that we are separate little sacks of skin-contained ego able to practice selfless identification with others, or conduct objective, unbiased research. The "mystical center of experience which we call 'I myself'" (Watts, 1966, p. 5) is reduced to an unscrupulous ego prone to wild megalomania if not reined in and controlled. From birth we are trained to live in terror lest we commit behaviors that might earn an accusation of narcissistic selfishness and subjectivity. As a result we successfully persuade ourselves that we can practice "self-less" identification with others and their needs. As social scientists we persuade ourselves that we can observe objectively as we approach our research "subjects" as The Other. We are careful not to become "too involved" with our subjects. The notion of the human as research instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) implicitly carries the taboo of narcissism given that the whole objectivist point is to keep the data clean and clear of the muddying influence of human thought, emotion, and value judgment.

In the finest Cartesian tradition, we have convinced ourselves that we can view the world with a detached objectivity and neutrality that ensures a direct knowledge of the world as it is. So how does a researcher, trained from birth to keep careful vigilance over a shameful characterological propensity to wander off into reflections about the felt difference between the world outside her skin and the machinations inside her skin, conduct qualitative research? In other words, just what are the implications of a lifetime of training in the art of objectivity for the neophyte qualitative researcher?

Guba and Lincoln's (1989) constructivist research paradigm holds as its central thesis the notion that research results are not descriptions of the way things "really are". Instead, Guba and Lincoln (1989) work from the "ontological assumption that realities, certainly social/behavioral realities, are mental constructions" (p.19). So my self shapes your self, which in turn shapes my self. We create our contexts, as our contexts create us. We construe meaning together through a tireless dance of interaction between people and information.

Whew. It reminds me of the profusion of shape-shifting globs on my computer's screen saver that hypnotically fade to a pin point, then inexplicably expand into a multitude of globs which slowly melt into one other to form more differently colored globs. Guba and Lincoln's "mental constructions" are the same undifferentiated mental globs I was taught indicate a serious character disorder involving self-preoccupation and an unhealthy inability to see the world as it really is; a series of neatly defined, causally stacked boxes. I came to understand that to ask the question, "What is the relationship between how I see the world and how the world sees me?" reveals a curiosity that fairly bulges with narcissistic implication.

Mine is a lifetime of training on how to look at the world through the eyes of others. I was taught that this view of the world through another's eyes actually was their view. However, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that it is my construction of their view: "Constructions are, quite literally, created realities. They do not exist outside of the persons who create and hold them; they are not part of some 'objective' world that exists apart from their constructors" (p. 143). And, as if that isn't enough to throw a lifetime of positivist thinking into chaos, Guba and Lincoln (1989) go on to say:

A construction once formed is likely to maintain itself...Constructions are self-sustaining and self-renewing. Constructions, like other forms of knowing such as theories, are able to 'wall off' contravening evidence, by their very nature. The problem of inducing change is thus not a matter simply of raising consciousness or introducing new rational considerations (in fact, rational considerations are usually the last ones that will change a construction) but a matter of coming to grips with the problematic nature of constructions. (p. 145)

So, not only is the world not as I thought it was (a place to ontologically know), the assumption itself (that I can ontologically know the world), erroneous though it may be, is a self-maintaining and self-renewing construction that will resist change.

It's true. I have noticed it. When all of a sudden, in the course of a few research classes, I am asked to look at the world through my own eyes, record that experience and call it research, everything in me all but goes into total shutdown. That's not research, that's scientifically

sanctioned narcissism! I can't do that, it's not objective! I'm being asked to publicly document evidence of my deepest neurosis.

I learned early on ways to demonstrate that my observation of the world was devoid of subjectivity by assuming the cool dispassionate rationality we all agree to recognize as a sign of objectivity. Faith in objectivity was so revered that it could even be applied to looking at the Self--a fine and noble activity when done in a spirit of critical self-improvement; a narcissistic indulgence when undertaken in the service of congratulatory aggrandizement. Ah, but here I am going on about myself when I'm supposed to be discussing research.

In the past several months I have been struggling with "finding" a research topic worthy of a dissertation. I have looked for something rivetingly interesting, knowing all the while that anything really fascinating would have to be deeply personal. And that, I scoldingly remind myself, borders on the narcissistic. To pursue a topic that really grabs me, and addresses questions with which I enjoy playing, would surely be a function of my self-absorption. Besides, I ask myself, what would such questions have to do with family therapy?

I have also thought about possible ways to research these topics. I not only want a topic that I like, it also needs to be researchable. This requirement places a serious restriction on the range of possible topics. I found I either had a topic that was not researchable, or a research design that nicely researched a topic that held no interest for me.

I finally came to the realization that my notion of "participant observer" was essentially just a new label tacked onto the same old objective positivism that I have been trained in since kindergarten. While calling it qualitative research, I was still thinking quantitatively. While labeling it "negotiated meanings" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or "reflexivity" (Steier, 1991), I was in the process of creating a research project that would test out hypotheses. Language such as "finding" a research design or "choosing" a topic lead me to think from a positivist lens rather than from a qualitative lens in which both topic and research design emerge. I assumed that because I have knowledge about qualitative research I was thinking qualitatively. I attempted to plan a qualitative study in the same way one plans a quantitative study. And, just as if it were to be a quantitative study, the picture I had of my role as participant observer resembled a positivist so objective that Newton would have been proud.

I discovered I was attempting to devise an entire research project after which I would just go do it--a fine positivist research strategy. Meloy (1994) cautions against attempts to plan out a qualitative research project in a way that attempts to answer last questions first:

Those of us who have completed at least one major research project using qualitative methodologies have learned that it is only AT THE END of the experience that we begin to see the whole we constructed. To committees and graduate students, such last minute knowledge is not yet acceptable--"What are the a priori foci?" and "What will you have when you are finished?" are examples of questions that we have been led to believe we should be able to answer from the very beginning. (p. 1)

Babcock (as cited in Steier, 1991) remarks that the real tragedy of Narcissus' was that he was not narcissistic enough. Had he been a bit more self-reflexive he might have moved beyond a mere awareness of himself as an Other and progressed to an awareness of being self-aware of himself as an Other. I glean from this that mere awareness of myself as a component of the qualitative research process is not sufficient. Steier (1991) puts it this way:

By holding our own assumed research structures and logics as themselves researchable and not immutable, and by examining how we are a part of our data, our research becomes, not a self-centered product, but a reciprocal process. The voices of those with whom we interact, our reciprocators (a calling I prefer), respondents, informants and subjects, are enhanced rather than lessened. Rather than being narcissistic, we become, through taking reflexivity seriously, social constructionist researchers. (p. 7)

Perhaps I am not narcissistic enough. Perhaps qualitative research can not qualify as such until the researcher is immersed in the research process. While it is necessary to think about qualitative research outside a context of conducting research activities, it is not enough. Doing research activities must be conducted simultaneously so that both topic and design emerge. "The naturalist elects to allow the research design to emerge ... rather than to construct it preordinately (a priori) because it is inconceivable that enough could be known ahead of time about the many multiple realities to devise the design adequately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41).

Guba and Lincoln (1989, Lincoln & Guba, 1985) share the notion that knowledge is constructed by the researcher and the researched during the process of inquiry. Steier (1991) informs us that "the research process itself must be seen as socially constructing a world or worlds, with the researcher included in, rather than outside the body of their own research" (p. 2). Given this, a piece of qualitative research must of necessity be personal, as it contains all the perceptual premises, histories and values held by the persons who participate. To make meaning of the research process, I think and write on ideas that do not merely include me, but are me. In fact, those ideas cannot not be me because it is research done by me. But, I'm probably just being narcissistic again.

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