

Narcissism in Postmodern Society

Chia-I Hou, Jiun-Hao Wang, and Kun-Sun Shiao

National Taiwan University, Department of Bio-Industry Communication and Development, Taipei, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT- Freud's theory on narcissism was developed in a society where the bourgeois had influential dominant power, so the analysis he proposed was in a cultural and historical atmosphere created by the upper class. Moreover, Christopher Lasch also mentioned his in influential book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978) that narcissistic culture was taking place in a "late capitalism." I intend to argue in this paper that Lasch's narcissistic culture was embedded in a postmodern society, that is, "late capitalism" refers to postmodernism. Therefore, I employ the ideas postmodern thinkers such as Baudrillard, Georg Simmel, and Habermas to discuss how the characteristics of individuals living in postmodern society are similar to the characteristics of narcissists portrayed by Lasch. First, I elaborate on the issue of self-identity, followed by a discussion of narcissistic culture depicted by Lasch. Finally, I propose the contribution and critiques of Lasch's discourse of development of narcissistic culture.

KEYWORDS- Habermas, Lasch, Self-identity, Simmel

I. BACKGROUND

This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value...He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up...he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal. (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p.415-416) Christopher Lasch was primarily concerned with the collapse of patriarchy, the decline of the family, paternal authority, and the growth of Cold War liberalism, which led to the rise of narcissistic culture. Lasch adopted Freud's theory that the "unconscious represents an inaccessible domain untamable by social blandishments" (Siegel, 1980, p. 285). Lasch held belief in Freud's concept that individuals are suffering from irreconcilable psychic conflict between instinct and culture throughout their whole lives. "Lasch supposed that in capital society, family had been unintentionally to aid the growth of an omnivorous bureaucracy...whose aim is to crush the possibility of personal autonomy and hence potential opposition to the capitalist juggernaut" (p. 285). Lasch contended that "narcissism was both cause and effect of the individualism, the preoccupation with self, and the

flight from commitment that they argued were newly prevalent in American life" (Lunbeck, 2014, p. 2). According to Lasch, the 1960s was the termination of the bourgeois, and society faced a tremendous change. This echoes Daniel Bell's statement in the 1970s that "bourgeois culture vanished long ago" and that "the breakup of the traditional bourgeois value system, in fact, was brought about by the bourgeois economic system" (cited from Lunbeck, 2014, p. 23). The concept of narcissism...provides [us with] a way of understanding the psychological impact of social change" (Lasch, 1978, p. 50). In the era (where I consider already being in the postmodern age) individuals were lost and failed to pursue the goals of life, they felt "subjective experience of emptiness and isolation (p. 51)". Lasch indicated that individualism influenced by economic thoughts in the 19th century required individuals to work hard and save for the future, and individuals did have desire to fulfill their aims; however, "changes in the structure of capitalism had fundamentally reshaped the American personality" (Tyler, 2007, p. 353). Individuals in the 1960s were living in a time when their desires were countless and could not be satisfied. They had no interest in thinking about their past and exploring the future. Without thinking about their own history, individuals were lost. Those characteristics of individuals mentioned above are in accord with those of individuals' psychological traits in postmodern society. Therefore, Lasch further implied that the tension at his time could be dealt with narcissism.

II. SELF-IDENTITY: NARCISSISTS IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY

The emergence of narcissistic culture came from individuals' instincts to come up with a strategy to handle the tension between individual existence and outside structure out of their control. Nonetheless, the unconscious mentality is so weak that even when individuals live in an affluent and stable society, in a consumerist society, they cannot reject any seduction and self-indulgence and become hedonic (Yeh, 2008). Most important of all, consumerism is the prevailing characteristic of postmodern society where individuals lost their self-identity.

Baudrillard's work could serve as a supplemental conception for us to comprehend the historical background with regard to self-identity. Baudrillard claimed that the progress of civilization came from neither mortality nor the implementation of positive

social values; instead, it came from the turn of immorality and vice. Vice appeared as a form as rupture and charm of the floating signs, they hailed people in a playful and fancy way. The result is that people have difficulty forming their consciousness of responsibility and worse, abandon it (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 72-74). As Fredric Jameson indicated, in postmodern society, the primary problem that human beings as subjects confront is no longer the alienation Marxists proposed. It is the rupture of self-identity that human beings struggle with because the concept of alienation assumes a centered but possibly disappearing self. However, having de-centered and multiple selves in postmodern society, alienation loses its essence and what is left is the individual desire to find self-identity (cited from Turkle, 1998, p.60).

But what is self-identity? For Giddens (1994), "Identity is the creation of constancy over time, that very bringing of the past into conjunction with an anticipated future, the ever changing members of networks and the transformation of the 'self' lead to a crisis of trust and ontological security." In the book *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Giddens has charted the development of the reflexive project of the self in the late modern age, with particular attention to the changing relationship between body and self. For the same reason mentioned above, we can not discuss "self" solely and exclude the time context in which the self exists. Giddens's perspective from a sociological and macro level can provide a background and maybe justify another underlying assumption of the study of why narcissism is an issue in modern society. The "self" as an entity exists in a macro-level aggregate—society—thus one can not discuss the "self" without mentioning the concept in which the "self" is embedded and intertwined with. For Erikson, self-identity has two forms. One equates to "personal identity," which refers to a human being's consciousness of the continuity of his or her existence over time and "to a subjective sense of continuous existence and a coherent memory" (Erikson, 1968, p. 7). Another self-identity referring to 'social' or 'collective' identity expands the idea and refers to the belongingness in a community. "Identity then means 'identification' of oneself with others" (Wagner, 2001, p. 67). That is, individuals need both identities to form their full self-identity.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to find self-identity in postmodern society. In modern or industrial society, individuals were divided into two obvious classes—proletariat and bourgeois—depending on whether they own tools or funds to produce commodities. They could either belong to the former or the latter and do what they are supposed to do. There were fixed social norms and language structures for them to abide by and they were very aware of their role in the community or society. However, in postmodern society, all categories, including the differentiation of classes, are entirely broken, and all boundaries are either blurred or do not even exist. Postmodern society is famous for its characteristics of hybrids, loss of the meaning of everything, and hyperreality. Lasch mentioned the influence of "the visual imagery of television in the development of narcissism." He argued that "reality becomes more and more experienced as being like the images, thus contributing to the general blurring in people's minds of what is real and

what is not" (Kilminster, 1984, p. 19). This speculation echoes Baudrillard's conception of hyperreality. Baudrillard argued that individuals are living in a world where signs, media representation, and simulations no longer bear any "real" world to refer to. That is, those signs are false ontological configurations without any reality to refer to. "Hyperreality is a moment of profound cultural transformation in which our 1 King, A. (1998). A critique of Baudrillard's hyperreality: towards a sociology of postmodernism. *Philosophy & social criticism*, 24(6), 47-66. cultural representations are no longer related to an independent reality and this new culture is linked by Baudrillard to the emergence and domination of the television as a means of communication" (King, 1998, p. 49).¹ Television is a unique medium for Baudrillard, as he considered that the television screen amounts to the end of all interpretation. The process of interpretation of all content is "abolished" in the hyperreality of the television screen.

Baudrillard further borrowed McLuhan's concept of "implosion" and "stated that the boundary between representation and reality implodes, and that, as a result, the very experience and ground of 'the real' disappears" (Kellner, 1989, p. 67)². Obviously, there is not a real "reality" to Baudrillard. Accordingly, questions such as "what is real?" and "who am I?" make individuals confused and lost in that there are no explicit groups for them to identify with.

Although individuals can play and experiment with myriads of selves by using social media such as Facebook or playing online role-playing games and having multiple identities in both virtual and real life, compared to modern society, people living in the postmodern era cannot spend their whole lives committed to one single collective identity like people did before. They might be dedicated to one group, but the transient social and economic atmosphere forces them to shift to another group. For example, an individual who works for a company might be laid off and he or she might be forced to find another job to survive. So the self-identity as an employee and the sense of belongingness in the previous company is forced to be discontinued, and he or she needs to switch his or her new self-identity in a short time. In addition, the anxiety of uncertainty as well as the lack of sense of security might last in that individuals could not find their location or social status. As a result, the fragmentation and rupture of human civilization results in individuals' losing their mental stability and becoming "schizophrenic" to help them escape from the constraints of the fixed bureaucracy system (Yeh, 2008, p. 169).

Considering individuals becoming "schizophrenic" might be an extreme analogy. We might use the theory of another scholar, Georg Simmel, to illustrate human mentality in postmodernity. In the article "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1950), Simmel made several arguments concerning postmodern humans, especially from a postmodern urbanization perspective. He claimed that the daily confrontation of the metropolis bombards one with diverse sets of stimuli and fragmentation due to a high density of population, mostly strangers, therefore, peoples' attitudes toward everyday life have evolved and an "urban personality" has been developed: an attitude of being numb, reserved, detached, and blasé. The urban

personality hence makes people indifferent to others and their surroundings and focus entirely on themselves, which I consider one of the reasons for the transformation of individual mentality in postmodern society.

Drawing on several psychoanalytic thinkers such as Freud, Kohut, and Kernberg, Lasch addressed the issue of the advent and forming of narcissistic individualism in America in *The Culture of Narcissism*. “Lasch claimed that the new narcissist identifies not with the work ethic and the responsibilities of wealth but with an ethic of leisure, 2 Kellner, D. (1989). *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to postmodernism and beyond*. Stanford University Press.

hedonism, and self-fulfillment” (1982, p. 221; cited from Tyler, 2007, p. 353). Instead of being ‘other-directed’ and future-orientated, Lasch’s definition of a narcissist is ‘inner-directed,’ lives only in the present, demands ‘instant gratification,’ has little moral or ethical capability, and is sexually permissive and perverse” (Tyler, 2007, p. 353). When delineating gratification, Lasch blamed capitalists’ greedy ambition to enlarge the consumption market and mourned the disappearance of self-restraint (Lunbeck, 2014). He discussed the old and new social order and considered the former “enjoining its postponement of” gratification and the latter immediate. Lasch contended that the ongoing narcissistic culture revolution was a “terrific thing for American capitalism, which needed hedonists—consumers of culture, sex, and enjoyment—to sustain its new markets” (Lunbeck, 2014, p. 20). Later he linked “mass culture of hedonism” to the development of narcissistic personality (Lunbeck, 2014). Lasch’s argument of male adult personality was influenced by Freud’s elaboration of culture and he pinpointed that “the (male) individual’s existence is indissolubly tied to the resolution of the Oedipal complex” and he considered the failure of patriarchal family leading to the victory of culture over instinct. Lasch ascribes all the positive aspects of culture to the patriarchal family as the cultural form that enables the Oedipal complex to be successfully resolved” (Tyler, 2007, p.353). As a result, the father did not play a dominant role in the family as he did before. On the contrary, since the Oedipal complex disappears, “Lasch aligns narcissism with femininity, and Lasch’s argument of male adult personality was influenced suggests that the increase in narcissism is equivalent to an emasculation of the male personality” (Barrett and MacIntosh, 1982, p. 112; Engel, 1980, p. 88; cited from Tyler, 2007, p. 353), leading to “males becoming increasingly vulnerable to domination by consumerism” (cited from Tyler, 2007, p. 353). The tendency of narcissists “vulnerable to consumerism” is the insatiable consumer “contingent upon a post-scarcity society and a personality structure” that has weak self control and is easy to be manipulated” (Baron, 1983, p. 302).

I would argue that now that the father’s role in the family has declined, children, especially male, have lost an exemplar to emulate, which “left people with little alternative but to ‘construct’ their identity” (Gurdtein, 2006, p. 20). Moreover, as Max Horkheimer (1959) demonstrated, “as the father loses his productive skills and economic independence because of the rise of the factory system and wage labor, the child will no longer perceive his father as a worthy model to emulate” (Baron,

1983, p. 300). (I will discuss the family’s role in shaping narcissists later.) Therefore, individuals turned to mass media such as films and advertising to seek exemplars to imitate, which in turn reinforced the degree of narcissism of individuals in that those figures or individuals emulated were either celebrities or famous figures.

III. NARCISSISTS AND GOFFMAN

In addition, Lasch’s view of narcissists is “grandiose and manipulative...They deploy their considerable charm in parasitical relation to others, whom they can experience only as sources of ‘approval and admiration’” (Lunbeck, 2014, p. 18). The fact that those narcissists with the trait of needing to be approved and admired tend to present themselves in daily life made it no surprise that Lasch mentioned Goffman to support his account.

Lasch illustrated that his time “produced ordinary individuals an escalating cycle of self-consciousness—a sense of the self as a performer under the constant scrutiny of friends and strangers” (p. 91). He cited Goffman’s passage: “As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subjects to ups and downs...A certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogeneous performance at every appointed time” (p. 90). Lasch later emphasized again that all of us “live surrounded by mirrors” and that we keep seeking attention from people around us. He also indicated individuals “are still obsessed with the idea of looking into the mirror” (p. 94) to reassure themselves that they have good-looking appearances and good performance. Moreover, he demonstrated that it is due to the individuals’ caring about their presentation in daily life that altered the entire structure of social and interpersonal relations. Lasch claimed that through his analysis of interpersonal relations, he came to a conclusion similar to those of psychoanalysis.

However, interpersonal relations are not the relations that are pivotal throughout Lasch’s observation. It is individuals’ original families that has significant impact on individuals’ forming of narcissistic personalities. Lasch believed that we have a deep structure in our minds—unconsciousness—that is formed in our “early development and later difficult to access” (Scialabba, 2015), in Lasch’s formulation:

The individual...develops an unconscious predisposition to act in certain ways and to re-create in later life, in his relations with lovers and authorities, his earliest experiences. Parents first embody love and power, and each of their actions conveys to the child, quite independently of their overt intentions...But it also requires that culture be embedded in personality. Socialization makes the individual want to do what he has to do; and the family is the agency to which society entrusts this complex and delicate task (p.128- 129).

Evidently, we can tell from the formulation above that Lasch is in line with Parson’s argument that “families are factories that produce human personalities” (cited from Baron, 1983, p. 297) and he agreed that this narcissistic personality type is the essential product of childhood socialization (p. 297). In addition, because Lasch’s

analysis was based on Freud's theory, which assumes that the adult personality is fixed during childhood socialization and is resistant to change (p. 297), family therefore plays an essential role in shaping individuals' narcissistic personalities, which is the reason that Lasch emphasized the function of family. Freud also considered that the function of family is that it "mediates between the child's highly volatile instincts and the civilized world" (Baron, 1983, p. 304). Actually, Lasch's viewpoint of the role family plays was deeply influenced by the Frankfurt School.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

The scholars of the Frankfurt School identified themselves as Marxists and were concerned with "liberating historical materialism from what they saw as its nondialectical dependence on the economic base" (Baron, 1983, p. 299). Due to the frustration in finding a reason to explain the motivation of the German proletariat's failing to "take up the banner of the Socialist Party" from a historical materialism perspective, those Frankfurt School scholars referred to psychoanalysis to explore the answers, and family was considered an essential issue to address. "They conceptualized the family as a mediating institution that intervened between individuals in their everyday lives and large-scale structure such as political, economic, and ideological apparatuses" (Baron, p.299). As Max Horkheimer (1972) pointed out, "the family, as one of the most important formative agencies...gives this human being in great measure the indispensable adaptability for a specific authority-oriented condition up which the existence of the bourgeois order largely depends" (cited from Baron, p. 299). Although I argued previously that the bourgeois do not exist any longer, this does not contradict Horkheimer's emphasis on family serving as an important institution to socialize and internalize the outside world norms to children. In addition, Herbert Marcuse (1970) commented that the successful identification is that the "child perceive himself as dependent upon the father" for a role model and that "without the establishment of a firm inner authority attained by identification with the father, the superego is prevented from developing" (cited from Baron, p. 301).

V. LASCH'S CONTRIBUTION

Although Lasch demonstrated his primary arguments from narcissism—a psychological term especially used to describe males—he seemed to encourage feminism. Lasch utilized Freud's narcissism theory to elaborate on his discourse; he did not accept all of Freud's thoughts with regard to the personality. First of all, he did not consider narcissism from a pathological perspective; instead, he discussed the trait from a cultural perspective. Moreover, Freud focused his interpretation of narcissism on male children and emphasized the Oedipal complex; however, Lasch argued that the Oedipal complex had been resolved and aligned narcissism with femininity, and pointed out that the increase in narcissism is equivalent to an emasculation of the male personality. That is, according to Lasch, narcissism is not a gender issue, it is a trait that both males and females could have. Lasch also provoked more liberalization of female

sexuality and encouraged those females to be "even more narcissistic." He suggested that "the culture of narcissism requires that women smoke and drink in public, move about freely, and assert their right to happiness instead of living for others" (Lasch, 1978, p. 74; cited from Tyler, 2007, p.353). Lasch pointed out some female figures such as the prostitute, sexually liberated women, feminists, career women, lesbians, and bad mothers whose narcissistic personalities led to the destruction of the patriarchy (Tyler, 2007).

VI. CRITIQUES

Lasch's examination of narcissistic culture brought about a lot of critiques. Critics such as Kilminster (2008) and Tyler (2007) argued that Lasch did not discuss the advent of narcissistic culture based on empirical statistical data; moreover, Kilminster further disputed Lasch's analysis of clinical cases and based on which to generalize and justify the increasing degree of narcissism of individuals in his age is not plausible. I disagree with those accusations. First, a historian and he analyzed what happened in his era by reflecting on and contemplating his own observation in the social context. If he gathered data and analyzed it, he would fail to capture the holistic and nuanced vicissitude and richness of culture. Most important of all, if all scholars have to rely on empirical and statistical data to legitimate their theories, then it would be ironic that Kilminster would not doubt Freud, whose theory was built on his conversations with his clinical clients and his own interpretations of those patients' dreams and whose concept—narcissism—was adopted by the one (i.e. Lasch) he criticized.

Moreover, another example comes from another psychologist, Jean Piaget, who only observed his own children to think up his theory of cognitive development which is widely recognized. What about Marx, who even vehemently claimed that there would be a revolution in history? How could he evaluate or calculate how frustrated and angry the proletariat felt and to what degree were they able to sacrifice themselves to implement such a tremendously destructive revolution?

Notwithstanding, Lasch described the narcissistic culture in America by providing historical and social background, and numerous specific cultural phenomena taking place in America to articulate his discourse and support his insights, which is a precious valued trait for a historian.

Furthermore, Lasch is not alone. According to Tyler (2007), "There is a shift in the 1970s psychoanalytic literature on narcissism...and that psychologists also found an increase in the prevalence of symptoms of pathological narcissism among patients, a process that culminated in the appearance in 1980 of 'Narcissistic Personality Disorder' (NPD) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association" (p. 346). While Kernberg emphasized that the increase in clinical narcissistic cases was due to 'a shift in our clinical emphasis' instead of personal traits of the entire population of America (p. 346), scholars still consider the increase in incidences of NPD as a result of "an underlying pattern of social and cultural change." As Lasch noted, "the concept of narcissism provides us...with a way of understanding the psychological impact of social changes.... It provides

us...with a tolerably accurate portrait of the 'liberated' personality of our time (Lasch, 1976, p. 10; cited from Tyler, 2008, p. 346).

VII. CONCLUSION

Lasch considered that American narcissistic individualism was shaped by the changes in the structure of late capitalism, and I consider late capitalism as a postmodern society in which individuals might lose their self-identity due to hyperreality. Also, several characteristics of individuals are typical characteristics revealed in individuals in postmodern society: they cannot not reject any seduction, they are obsessed with consumerism, they are self-indulgent and became hedonic. However, to deal with anxiety, individuals' instincts came up with a strategy to handle the tension between their existence and outside structure, resulting in their increase of psychological narcissistic personalities. According to Freud, the narcissistic personality is developed in childhood and is fixed even when individuals become adults. Hence, socialization in the family is essential to shaping the narcissistic personality. Nonetheless, due to consumerism, the patriarchy declined and the father lost his authority in the family, and children turned to outside world to seek exemplars to emulate, making individuals more narcissistic. This paper has discussed the waning of the patriarchy from Frankfurt

School scholars such as Horkheimer and Adorno, since Lasch himself was deeply influenced by those intellectuals.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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