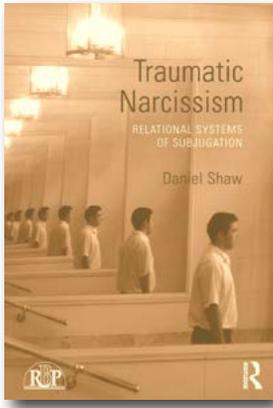


Reviewed by Debra Koppersmith, LCSW



Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation

By Daniel Shaw

(Routledge 2014)

The trauma referred to in Daniel Shaw's title is not experienced by narcissists, but by those who find themselves in relationships with them. In this powerful and highly readable book, Shaw describes in detail his understanding of what it means to be entrenched in a relationship in which an authority figure aims to subjugate another.

His work on this subject is informed by his personal history of living in an ashram in upstate New York for 10 years. While there, he was repeatedly denigrated by his guru and finally, after enduring this for years, was able to walk away. This experience inspired him to try to understand what drove his guru to interact with him and others in this manner and why the guru's followers participated in their own humiliation.

His exploration of the unique dynamics that occur within cults led him to a broader consideration of how those he calls traumatizing narcissists pursue their goal of complete authority through shaming and rigid control of others, while at the same time projecting and disavowing their own needs and dependency.

Shaw acknowledges the difficulty of gaining insight into the minds of these traumatizing narcissists because they are not able to tolerate self reflection and

are unlikely to come into therapy. Consequently, we get to know them through the eyes of people they have damaged and by learning about the impact that these psychic collisions have had on their lives. What these patients show us is that a narcissistic relational experience is so dehumanizing that it is ultimately impossible to endure. In virtually every case, the relationship saps the patient's vitality, autonomy and subjectivity, as they are controlled, subjugated and exploited. In the most severe cases, the psychic abuse can cause its victims to feel invisible and destroy their identities and even—if not recognized and treated—their lives. Through this lens, we can see how patients have experienced the developmental trauma of objectification through subjugation.

Relational Perspective

From a well informed relational perspective, Shaw provides rich and powerful theoretical and clinical material by which to deconstruct the developmental world and patterns of abuse that encompass the narcissists and their subjects. Underscoring the relational ideas of intersubjectivity, mutuality, co-construction, complementarity, doer/done to dynamics and, highlighting the conceptual frameworks of writers such as Jessica Benjamin, Irwin Hoffman, and Steve Mitchell, he looks at a variety of interdependent relationships. He deconstructs patterns of relational trauma that define, control and corrupt the very essence of mutual recognition and love - or - what Leonard Shengold describes

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so effectively as “soul murder” of the lives of those traumatized.

The relational dynamics of traumatic narcissism occur across the spectrum in our society, and Shaw explores this in the context of families, groups, and politics. Whether the relationship is a parent and a child, a couple, a patriarch and his children, or a leader and his followers, the traumatizing narcissist is an authority with the unrelenting intention to create a dynamic in which a sense of superiority is maintained by destabilizing the other.

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In a section on cults, he elaborates on the exploitative relational systems of authority in analytic institutes, particularly The Sullivan Institute. Cataloging destructive practices that include the encouragement of incest and sex with one’s therapist, he describes the two leaders who created a system that supported their own omnipotence by controlling and demonizing their members, many of whom lived together, communally. Families were pulled apart, members were encouraged not to have contact with their children, and many couples divorced and remarried each other’s spouses. Shaw poignantly concludes that, before being exposed, this cult practiced nothing less than mental torture.

Although the book was written in 2014, its description of how, historically, we have been collectively traumatized and controlled by narcissistic leaders presages the election of Donald Trump and its aftermath. With what now seems like uncanny prescience, he cautions

about the dangerous tendency of narcissists in positions of authority to maintain power and control by means of intimidation, belittling, condescension and blaming others.

The book’s appeal and accessibility are due, in part, to the personal experiences Shaw writes about. As both a victim of and witness to coercive and sadistic humiliation, he brings an honesty regarding his own vulnerability that enriches the book’s impact. His work is also informed by his understanding of traumatic narcissism as depicted in literature. For example, he tells of a moving personal experience after seeing Eugene O’Neill’s autobiographical play, “Long Day’s Journey Into Night,” when he was prompted to delve into O’Neill’s life. In doing so, he discovered a significant omission from “Long Day’s Journey” and, indeed, from all of O’Neill’s autobiographical work: there is no mention in them of O’Neill’s disowning and disinheriting of his three children, two of whom committed suicide and one who became a depressive alcoholic. It can thus be seen that O’Neill’s presentation of himself as the despairing tragic hero, whose need for the love of his morphine-addicted mother could never be satisfied, covers the contempt and envy he feels toward those—including his own children—who compete for a parent’s love. What Shaw goes on to describe is the pain and sorrow of inter-generational narcissistic trauma that goes unrecognized with tragic and lethal consequences.

Despite his heart-wrenching recognition of the “psychological enslavement and parasitic exploitation” that is created by charismatic leaders, Shaw also strikes a note of optimism. Speaking of his deep regard for Erich Fromm, for whom narcissism was the opposite of love, he suggests that, when there is the capacity to give and receive love, there is hope for those traumatized. 

Debra Koppersmith is a psychoanalyst, clinical social worker and educator. She is on the board of the AAPCSW and co-editor of their on-line monograph, on the editorial board of *The Psychoanalytic Review*, and a training and supervising psychoanalyst at NPAP. She has written and presented papers on early childhood parental loss and trauma, among other topics, at national and international conferences. She has a private practice in New York City and Dobbs Ferry.