

On Narcissistic Mortification

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As a descriptive term, shame covers a broad range of affective states from mild embarrassment and self-consciousness, through varying intensities of chagrin and humiliation, to the extreme of mortification. As a psychoanalytic concept, I would define mortification as the primitive terror of self dissolution, triggered by the sudden exposure of one's sense of a defective self (Lansky, 2000). *Mort*, in Latin, French and Italian, means death. In short, it is death by embarrassment. I believe that the intolerable nature of mortification underlies narcissistic defenses and narcissistic character structure. In what follows, I will first describe the phenomenology of narcissistic mortification and present a patient for whom experiences of mortification are recurrent. I will then touch on some of the developmental antecedents of mortification and speculate on some links between mortification, annihilation anxiety, and the narcissistic character.

The experience of mortification entails physical sensations, be they few or many, and multiple extremely painful affects. Together, they prompt a frantic need to act, usually upon the object.

The physical agony patients report entail such experiences as "a burning and painful tingling all over"; "a dull leaden pain in the chest that slowly deepens and spreads throughout my torso"; "prickling, blanching, and sweating on the face which spreads first to the neck and chest and then on to the rest of the body"; "coldness all over sometimes followed by numbness"; dizziness; nausea and vomiting"; "the sensation of being unable to see" (see also Ellis, 1910; Lewis, 1971).

On the psychological level, the experience of mortification is a simultaneous mix of several, intense, affect-laden reactions. Patients describe feeling shocked, exposed, and humiliated: "It's like being hit by a car" ... "My intrinsic badness has been revealed" ... "I feel my intolerability to him/her" ... "I have the absolute conviction that he/she hates me and it's my fault." The experience always entails shock, even though it has happened many times to such individuals. It is terrifying, as earliest infantile fears of annihilation are re-activated. More than one patient has told me: "It feels like I won't survive it; it feels like I'm coming apart." The most common description is "I feel like I am being annihilated." In a desperate frenzy, the individual scrambles, both internally and externally, to do something to effect a positive self-image in the eyes of their narcissistic object in order to survive. Mortification is a traumatic anxiety, as opposed to shame, which is a signal anxiety. Put another way, mortification is to shame what panic is to anxiety. The experience of mortification is extreme in its intensity, its global nature, and its lack of perspective.

Let me tell you about a patient, Mr. B, who can describe feeling mortified far better than I. Mr. B is a young, happily married, first generation South-Asian-American, successful in his professional career in English literature in which he is an authority. He has a confident, even serene manner, warmth, and responsiveness. He is quite likable. He is extraordinarily articulate, and he has a subtle sense of humor and irony. He is a passionate reader, and he charmingly embroiders his discourse in sessions with apt quotes from great authors, sometimes complete with page and line – just for the fun of it. He also has an unusual capacity to describe his internal processes.

Mr. B values his verbal and interpersonal skills, but he simultaneously devalues them as not "internally derived." People tell him he is confident and articulate. Many people like him enormously, but he repeats endlessly in sessions, "I never feel confident, articulate, or assured." "My confident self is fake." He says that he has always looked outside for who he is. He insists that inside there is nothing – "a

lack." When I have pointed out feelings he has given voice to, he acknowledges them but says they come and go in a "space of overall lack." He has a private, nihilistic belief that addresses his sense of emptiness. "No one is real. The whole world is fake, and I don't give a shit." The contradiction between his internal and external selves forms the basis for his propensity for mortification, for while each of these self-states is well developed and cohesive, they are discrete, and the gap between them is huge. Once either self-state is lost, both are difficult to re-capture. As Mr. B puts it:

I feel I am always in the gap between two or more selves, and there is a nothingness in that gap. What I feel is blankness... an in-between... a splitting apart... in the cracks between things. That doesn't seem like a feeling. It seems like a lack. A place. I am in that place most of the time... I exist in the cracks between possible selves...

Being in either self-state is like being safe on base. Trying to get from one to the other, however, is anything but automatic. Once on the move, the safety of a cohesed self-state is lost completely. What if his "unappealing," "weird," "nothing" self, as he refers to himself, shows through? What if he doesn't make it to the other self? "In the gap between possible selves," mortification wells up in him like a familiar nightmare. Mr. B describes the experience as follows:

I feel a blast furnace of embarrassment and self-consciousness, a shattering of language in my head which feels very violent, being blown to pieces, millions of shards in a washing machine being blown together. I can't shift my mode of thinking.

On another occasion:

It takes a herculean effort to convince myself that I am going to survive the despair and horror of it. I go through my life trying to avoid that blast furnace. It's like holding your breath under water. I feel anger and fear mixed in with self-consciousness. Anger at having to live with it, fear of it which is really overwhelming, also some relief because it is familiar. But at the base of it is self-consciousness. It is much more, which is mostly hard to articulate, because it is all those feelings at the same time.

This experience occurs most often when another person enters the picture, and he must relinquish his subjective self for his outwardly calm self.

When alone, I am floating around in a world of nothingness. Once I take seriously that you exist, everything in my head explodes, literally falls apart, with the knowledge that I am talking to another person. My mind can't stand the strain of another person out there. The language in my head is deeply based on the idea that there's no one out there.

Mr. B refers to the changeover as "the transitional state" or "crossover state." Even though this state is well known to him, it always takes him aback. Mr. B feels doomed to traverse this abyss because he wants people in his life, and he believes that it is essential to project a picture of a normal, likable person in order to have connections to others. He believes any breakthrough of what he "actually thinks and feels" will drive people away:

My wife asks me what I want for dinner. A person who feels nothing wants nothing, I can only imagine she would respond: "That's very unattractive – a nothing person." Saying "I feel nothing" will leave me with nothing to say. People will stop talking to me. I will lose relationships.

The crossover state can also happen without a triggering external event. For example, when he is alone, at home, moving from one activity to another, he often

finds himself shifting from his private, nihilistic state to looking at himself from the outside:

When I am in the kitchen, I don't know when to do the next thing. Should I walk across the floor and open the refrigerator? Would a normal person crack the eggs in this way? When I am in the shower, I ask myself: should I turn the hot water on now? How long does it make sense to decide? What does my hand look like turning on the water?

I dread greeting my dog. I love her, but I hate greeting her. She is so excited and happy. I don't know how to pet her in a way that looks excited. I think she will know that I am not good at it. It's even worse if my wife is there. She'll see that I don't know how to do it right.

Mr. B can and does make these crossovers, from his internal thoughts to an external perspective, and back again. But often, in the crossover, the idea of suicide—physical death instead of psychic death—seems preferable.

Mr. B. cherishes his nihilistic state. It feels like home to him, a respite from the fake objective perspective on himself, not to mention the dangers of annihilating mortification. Additionally, he asserts that from the cultural perspective of his South Asian family and friends, there is no such thing as a self. In fact, being nothing and no one is a valued perspective. He reminds me that the notion of self is very Western, as well as recent in the history of the world, and the majority of the world's people don't have it. Nevertheless, he longs to develop a "sense of self," of "authenticity," so that he can live without the constant fear of "exposure, rejection, and loss."

I will now offer a sketch of Mr. B.'s history, to provide a window into the developmental and dynamic underpinnings of his propensity for mortification, paying particular attention to his relationship with his mother and to the role of language.

Mr. B was the second of two children of South Asian immigrants. His parents were married in their country of origin, and his sister, six years older, was born there. The family moved to the States when his sister was five; Mr. B was born here one year later. His mother, father, and sister spoke their native local dialect. But to Mr. B they taught and spoke only their new broken English, believing it was for his own good. He has said: "There was always a background of confusion. I couldn't understand what any of the conversations around me were about."

Mr. B's early experience of his mother was that she was two different people depending upon which language she was speaking. When speaking her newly adopted English to him, she was blank and hard to read. As Mr. B put it: "There was no there there." Often she seemed frightened and fragmented. When speaking her native tongue to the other members of his family, as well as to her friends, she seemed to shift easily— from humor, to serious engagement, even anger— "as if there was a real center to her." While his mother could also show emotion to him, he reports that she did so in staccato fashion, with breaks in her delivery from one idea to the next, as if she was not connected to what she was saying. He states: "My mother sacrificed emotionality in the service of making me American. On some level, there really is nothing there between my mother and me."

Mr. B. also describes his mother as "superficial" and "into appearances." She taught him, in her words, to "be confident and neutral." Mr. B says that he learned early that his mother and he were not to express emotions to each other, that neither were to acknowledge the differences between them in language, culture, personality, or values, and that neither were ever to let each other know that anything was wrong. "My mother watched me a lot. It wasn't surveillance, rather it was a kind of perceptual knowing, to remind each other that we exist. All you've

got is an absence of an emotional relationship.” One favor his mother did for him, he says, was to let him spend long hours alone in his room. He doesn’t know why she didn’t make him go out and play with other kids, but he was quite relieved that he wouldn’t have to go out and face what he knew would be additional experiences of rejection and loss. In other words, very early on, Mr. B felt that who he was, was antithetical to holding on to an object. Who he was, was most likely to alienate, an experience he found mortifying. The only way to survive was to be what he had been taught others wanted him to be – confident and neutral.

As an adult, Mr. B. did become the outwardly confident successful American his mother wanted him to be. His mastery of the English language was the sign of the fulfillment of these ambitions, yet at the same time, he feels that English has never become an adequate vehicle for conveying his pre-verbal and ineffable experiences. He states, “Language is given to you from the world, as possibilities of ways to say things, but it’s the world’s language, so it’s never really authentically yours.” Indeed, his mother – the world to him – gave him language, but it was not authentic self expression for either of them. As he says:

There’s no helping me with my problem with language. Do you have a language for people who don’t speak, that can help them? There’s always been an experience of myself that is not about language: emptiness, disorganization, discombobulation. I don’t know anything. Utter confusion is what I have always felt.

Mr. B was thus left neither with an authentic mother tongue, nor a suitable acquired one, nor any belief that making verbal order or coherent sense of his internal confusion was possible. Language – the primary means for defining and expressing oneself and establishing contact with others – remains an enigma for him, the central paradox with which he lives. Esteemed for his ability to communicate to audiences of admiring yet anonymous others, he is mortified when trying to articulate his inner experience and make himself known in relationships. In traversing the “gap between possible selves...where words are thrown up like shards in a washing machine” he feels he will not survive. In this gap, he has neither words nor a self.

Let me now step back from my description of Mr. B and offer some theoretical thoughts about the experience of mortification. I see narcissistic mortification as a form of “annihilation anxiety,” a concept Hurvich (1989) defines as a virtually intolerable experience of terror, fright, and dread, related to a sense of “overwhelmed helplessness, reminiscent of the overwhelmed helplessness of infancy.” Hurvich considers annihilation anxiety to be the earliest anxiety, preceding and underlying all the anxieties that follow. He includes mortification among his six dimensions of annihilation anxiety (Hurvich, 2003), under the heading “Fears of Disintegration of the Self or of Identity.”

Certainly, traumatic, narcissistic mortification can be triggered by any occurrence – external or internal, real or imagined – wherein the individual feels him/herself to be objectionable to the object. To be clear, the loss is not object loss. It is a sudden loss of the psychic sense of self, which occurs simultaneously with a perception that the tie to a self-object is threatened. In other words, it is the sudden felt loss of a self-object, a primitive object tie still necessary to complete the sense of self (Kohut, 1971).

Developmentally, in keeping with Hurvich (2003), this disturbance in a stable, integrated sense of self is a function of traumatizing inadequacy in the early caregiver during the pre-separation-individuation phase of development. From the very earliest stages of his life, Mr. B’s mother related to him in an emotionally empty fashion. They had their own language, English, but it was stripped of the affective warmth and fullness of a “mother tongue.” He has said that there were no

expressions of love, joy, or pride from her toward him – none of the emotionality he believed he witnessed in her warm, easy chatter with others, albeit in a confusing tongue he could not understand. His subjective experience when she was with him was one of emptiness. His objective perspective on himself became dependent on the view of whichever object he was with, and always felt “fake.” He gradually became used to these two discreet self-states: the empty, nihilistic sense of self when alone, a state that gained him a certain amount of approval from his mother (whose religion and culture approved of selflessness and of the meaninglessness of the real world) and the outwardly “confident and neutral” façade his mother wanted him to exhibit when around people. He was always most comfortable alone, in his nihilistic state, probably because it felt like the most authentic connection between himself and his mother – two empty selves silently connected. Even a defective self connected to a defective object is preferable to the experience of no self.

Mr. B’s discrete cohesive self-states are examples of the defensive bulwarks that the narcissistic individual throws up against primitive, unregulated affects such as mortification. Such affect-regulating difficulties are a function of a lack of *evocative constancy*, the internal “capacity to maintain positively toned images of self and others with which to dispel feelings of self-doubt” (Adler and Buie, 1979). Without evocative constancy, *self-reflexivity* is not possible. Self-reflexivity is the ability to oscillate easily among varying perspectives on the self (Bach, 1977; Broucek, 1982). Mr. B described his lack of self-reflexivity as “difficulty managing the crossovers among possible selves.” In other words, in the absence of an internal store of positive images, and a correlated ability to reconfigure one’s self-image smoothly and easily, narcissistic individuals like Mr. B maintain discrete self-states in order to avoid even momentary shifting self-states.

Broadly speaking, narcissistic individuals use two defensive strategies for re-establishing cohesive self-states, both of which require acting on the object. The first of these, debasing the self and inflating the object in order to reacquire it, is more common in the deflated narcissist. It can include, for example, atonement, aggrandizement of the other, self-punishment, and self-flagellation. This is Mr. B’s mode. He regularly aggrandizes me, thanking me often, sometimes even for just greeting him. I am consistently idealized – all too smart and valuable.

The second route to recovery from a state of narcissistic mortification, more typical in inflated narcissists, is debasement of the object. This strategy involves attacking the other, in order to aggrandize and re-stabilize the self. There is always a winner and a loser. Such narcissists “fight fire with fire” or “take an eye for an eye” and claim they are “arighting the scales of justice.” Revenge seekers fit into this category. There are only winners and losers, and they must be the winners.

Many inflated narcissists are also adept at short-circuiting the plunge into mortification altogether, preemptively expelling impending feelings of shame and defectiveness by humiliating the other. These are shamers, and they are despised by their victims when they are successful. Some individuals have access to all of these defenses against mortification. Whichever route is taken, the individual cannot recover from mortification until a tolerable, familiar self-state is re-acquired, either by re-establishing the other as an approving object, or by destroying the other, temporarily or permanently.

As a final note, I’d like to point out a specific feature of Mr. B’s early relationship with his mother, perhaps not uncommon in patients with narcissistic disturbance. His mother’s seeming happiness when speaking her native tongue to other people and her unhappiness speaking English to him was probably not due only to her difficulty with English. More likely she *also* suffered from a “lack,” one that showed only around her son. The dead mother she was with him was likely the true state of affairs, and the alive way she was with others was a facade – her

own narcissistic defense. Mr. B needed to deny his mother's deadness and to believe that there was someone there – that her displeasure and unhappiness with him was his fault. This allowed him to retain the hopeful fantasy that he might yet be able to please her by behaving in ways she seemed to value. He has never stopped hoping in relation to others, but now his hope is geared toward being authentic, accepted for who he is, and thereby closer to others.

A long-term goal of psychoanalytic treatment with patients who suffer mortification is its transformation into shame, which includes the capacity to tolerate it and to use it as a signal. This long process entails working through both the early mortifying traumas as well as the unstable defenses related to them. Without such transformation, the individual is left with two unstable narcissistic defenses: self-damning, deflated states designed to appease and hold on to self-objects, or, narcissistic conceit, designed to project the defective self-experiences onto self-objects. Both defensive styles require continued dependence on self-objects and must be mounted again and again. Tolerating bearable shame can make self-appraisal and self-tolerance possible, ultimately leading to psychic separation and self-reliance.

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