

Narcissism in the Life of Howard Hughes: A Psychobiographical Exploration

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Abstract : Narcissism is a personality configuration which has both normal and pathological personality expressions. Narcissism is highly complex, and is linked to a broad field of research. There are both dimensional and categorical conceptualisations of narcissism, and a variety of theoretical formulations that have been put forward to understand the narcissistic personality configuration. Currently, Kernberg's Object Relations theory is well supported for this purpose. The complexity and particular defense mechanisms at play in the narcissistic personality make it a difficult personality configuration worth further research. Psychobiography as a methodology allows for the exploration of the lived life, and is thus a useful methodology to surmount these inherent challenges. Narcissism has been a focus of academic interest for a long time, and although there is a lot of research done in this area, to the researchers' knowledge, narcissistic dynamics have never been explored within a psychobiographical format. Thus, the primary aim of the research was to explore and describe narcissism in the life of Howard Hughes, with the objective of gaining further insight into narcissism through the use of this unconventional research approach. Hughes was chosen as subject for the study as he is renowned as an eccentric billionaire who had his revolutionary effect on the world, but was concurrently disturbed within his personal pathologies. Hughes was dynamic in three different sectors, namely motion pictures, aviation and gambling. He became more and more reclusive as he entered into middle age. From his early fifties he was agoraphobic, and the social network of connectivity that could reasonably be expected from someone in the top of their field was notably distorted. Due to his strong narcissistic personality configuration, and the interpersonal difficulties he experienced, Hughes represents an ideal figure to explore narcissism. The study used a single case study design, and purposive sampling to select Hughes. Qualitative data was sampled, using secondary data sources. Given that Hughes was a famous figure, there is a plethora of information on his life, which is primarily autobiographical. This includes books written about his life, and archival material in the form of newspaper articles, interviews and movies. Gathered data were triangulated to avoid the effect of author bias, and increase the credibility of the data used. It was collected using Yin's guidelines for data collection. Data was analysed using Miles and Huberman strategy of data analysis, which consists of three steps, namely, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Patterns which emerged in the data highlighted the defense mechanisms used by Hughes, in particular that of splitting and projection, in defending his sense of self. These defense mechanisms help us to understand the high levels of entitlement and paranoia experienced by Hughes. Findings provide further insight into his sense of isolation and difference, and the consequent difficulty he experienced in maintaining connections with others. Findings furthermore confirm the effectiveness of Kernberg's theory in understanding narcissism observing an individual life.

Keywords : Howard Hughes, narcissism, narcissistic defenses, object relations

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