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Family and Love in the Time of Me

ABSTRACT

The theoretical part of this article draws on terminology defined by theorists such as J.C. Kauffman, N. Luhmann, Ch. Lasch, E. Beck-Gernsheim and U. Beck, A. Giddens, L. Jamienson, E. Illouz, and Z. Bauman. The research on partnership relations involved in a culture of narcissism has been published in the book by the author of the article: ŚciupiderMłodkowska M., *Love in the time of Me: A sociopedagogical study*, Poznań 2018. The article describes the family and love from the perspective of transformations present in a culture of narcissism. The theoretical part of this article draws on terminology defined by theorists such as J.C. Kauffman, N. Luhmann, Ch. Lasch, E. Beck-Gernsheim and U. Beck, A. Giddens, L. Jamienson, E. Illouz, Z. Bauman and the author's own research.

The research on partnership relations involved in narcissism culture has been published in a book by the author of the article: M. Ściupider-Młodkowska, *Love in the time of Me: A sociopedagogical study*. Its theoretical narrative and methodological conclusions focus principally on partnership relations described in scripts from young people studying at selected universities in Poland and Czechia.

The research that led to this article was a qualitative-quantitative study aiming to answer the following question: Which cultural models of partner relations are preferred and practised by young people studying in Poland and Czechia and how they differ. Such a subject

KEYWORDS

love in the time of Me, relations in social pedagogy, the culture of narcissism, recognition and voyeurism in media

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required the construction of several research tools: extended questionnaires for 400 respondents in Polish and Czechia, an understanding interview (J-C. Kauffman) for two hundred heterosexual couples, and live and virtual debates as part of the author's course 'Intimacy between being together and separate'.

The dynamic picture of partner relations in the lives of Polish and Czech students allowed four categories of relationship history to be distinguished. Most Polish students (of whom more were females) represented the initiating-traditional partnership script, but a highly individualistic form, while the majority of Czech students fell into the category of postmodern partnership scripts. These results do not allow unambiguous theses but propose a constructivist diagnosis of current changes in the Me epoch, whose representatives are entangled in cultural narcissism, and are often unable to form lasting intimate relationships, instead seeking acknowledgement and self-adoration, in essence: *Selfie, ergo sum*.

Introduction

Family forms the basis for the establishment and development of social, institutional, cultural and unrepeatable relations needed by the community. Family and love cooperate with each other strongly. Family provides the basis for experiencing maternal, paternal, sisterly and brotherly love, as well as toxic love, the consequences of which are faced not only by an individual who suffered them, but also by the whole future generations. Hurting, harming love, very often unconsciously, leads to the stigma of loneliness, exclusion and difficulties in establish close relations. Therefore the whole current of the humanistic psychology of personality discerns enormous influence of experiences connected with the so-called difficult or toxic love, which is a direct source of problems in adult life such as: depression, alcoholism, shopping addition, bulimia, anorexia and many other examples of diseases which require support and specialist help. The influence and contribution of the developing psychological research, which is helpful in the building of community, is enormous, extremely necessary and valuable.

The aim of this article is to emphasise that contemporary changing socio-cultural determinants are parallel to individual and family

determinants, as they influence the understanding and defining of feelings, emotionality and love, which are in the centre of any relations. According to Niklas Luhmann,¹ love is a great prime mover, forming, like money and power, the basis for affecting the whole social structures, and therefore it is worth of analysing scientifically. The article shows and defines certain widely available codes of emotionality and love, sanctioned by specific research, among other things the author's project concerning the biographies of relations among students at Polish and Czech universities in 2013–2016.²

The aim of analysing the character of contemporary interpersonal relations set herself by the author is justified for several reasons.

First of all, what is observed on the one hand is the hybridism, diversity of family relations, which has changed from the patriarchal model to the relations emphasising quality, but also classified as fragile, ephemeral, short-term relations, often electronic and imagined. Considering the long development of the so-called traditional family and how much the preindustrial model has changed, one should not remain indifferent to the transformations and an opportunity to analyse them in the context of both opportunities and threats.

Secondly, social pedagogy, which is *in statu nascendi* as to the development of appropriate tools and methods examining online relations, including the development of an appropriate network of support in the face of crimes observed in the virtual world: cyberstalking, sexting and sponsoring, analyses the socio-cultural and family backgrounds responsible for social problems. Therefore a concern for the quality of family and love relations, for them to be a bastion, indissoluble community and the motivation to become involved into social and political activities supporting various forms of the family, is justified.

¹ N. Luhmann, *Semantyka miłości. O kodowaniu intymności*, trans. J. Łoziński, Warszawa 2003.

² Research carried out for the purpose of the doctoral dissertation defended under the supervision of J. Modrzewski in the Faculty of Educational Studies, made possible by a grant from the Adam Mickiewicz University Foundation in Poznań, published as a whole in the book: M. Ściupider-Młodkowska, *Miłość w epoce Ja. Studium socjopedagogiczne*, Poznań 2018.

Love in the era of Me, that is relationships of the “exodus” type

Love present in the culture of narcissism, which Christopher Lasch³ noticed twenty-seven years ago, when economic transformations and increased life consumption resulted in the American society in a widely available trend of the self-improvement of an individual, has its roots in a desire for obtaining notable benefits and rivalry (fight for recognition) in almost every sphere of life. Since that time love has not been only an individual project, but it has been entangled in the media, institutions, market and advertising, to a large extent affected by social sex relations and economics. This relations has often been given metaphorical names in social sciences such as: to be together separately (Zygmunt Bauman), confluent or pure love (Anthony Giddens), a relation known as “background intimacy” or *intimate ambient* (Shery Turkle). All the terms around love, which have only been signalled here, share the characteristic sense of uncertainty and the lack of security, as they lay great emphasis on emotions associated not with intimacy, but loneliness/solitude, not with unity, but exclusion, not with a sense of pride, but shame, not with responsibility for the decisions made, but short-lived relationships and easy separation. The spirit of self-improvement present in every sphere of life: health, intellectual area, family, profession and the cult of Me culture training personality aspiring to free decisions, to a large extent manipulated relationships and interpersonal relations and induced to the “deadly game of intimidating friends and seducing people,”⁴ which in turn gave rise to suffering and loneliness.

It is not a big discovery that getting involved in a love relation has always been connected with certain suffering, romantic or sentimental love so beautifully described at least in literature, in the role of Romeo and Juliet or Tristan and Iseult. Contemporary relations hurt not only for the reason of individual engagement or a conflict of interests and protection of the lovers’ families, but also (and perhaps above all) for the reason of cultural narcissism, like uncertainty, identity chaos, seeking recognition in panic, not only in virtual reality. Science, technology and political influences largely rationalised love, as proved by

³ Ch. Lasch, *Kultura narcyzmu*, Warszawa 2015.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 93.

the Israeli scholar E. Illouz.⁵ In accordance with the author's analyses, vivid, widely available technologies allowing to be a widely available individual looking for an ideal partner have distorted the intentions of emotions; partners as creators or builders – *homo construens* have got lost, which is the aim of relations, that is commitment, getting to know the other person. As a result love has undergone disenchantment, commercialisation, exchange of interests.

The phenomenon of the created Internet relation without attachment has been described by Michał Wanke as follows:

To be in a relation with somebody with “background intimacy” means to be present in their life with one's privacy made public. To be with somebody “together separately” ... means to perform one's identity online – potentially in front of the whole world of those who have equipment with access to the Internet. Finally, to be with somebody *intimate ambient* is to watch the stream of their identity without commitment which would require a relation so saturated with information beyond the world of the Internet.⁶

Being in constant contact with somebody on the one hand creates an illusion of being important and necessary, exempts from obligations to close family relations, and on the other, it deludes with the promise that virtual commitment of this kind will satisfy the need of uniqueness, overcome ordinariness and invisibility in a large crowd of acquaintances, or the so-called “friends” commenting in an open forum the establishing/breaking off the relationship.

The culture of narcissism, manifesting itself in sophisticated means of virtual communication oriented at “Me” of an individual, strongly enters into emotionality, at the same time contributing to changes in an attitude to general interpersonal relations. The participants in online meetings do not cease using certain anthropotechnics in daily life. Corresponding, and even talking, they use certain abbreviations and thought codes, making use of the so-called greeters, emoticons, likes and other symbols in nomenclature. Moreover, the diversified partner selection offered on dating and social

⁵ E. Illouz, *Dlaczego miłość rani. Studium socjologiczne*, trans. M. Filipczuk, Warszawa 2016.

⁶ M. Wanke, “E-mocje, przypadki rozszerzonej rzeczywistości afektywne,” in: *Studia z socjologii emocji. Podręcznik akademicki*, ed. A. Czerner, E. Nieroba, Opole 2011, p. 291.

networking sites accustoms individuals living at the same time in the landscape of media impressions to the constant craving for a “better option” and a constant need to be accepted in the real world. Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak proves that interfering in values, disturbances of any kind and personality disorders can be observed, with the same strength and frequency, both in groups suffering from emotional and social deficiencies, and in socialisation characterised by excess and abundance.

Everyday experiences in the conditions of abundance, overload, crowd, wealth, extras and other signs of surfeit can also overburden and use up physical, emotional and intellectual reserves and lead to disturbances.

Along with the use of more technologically sophisticated means the range of ideas and forms of propagating models and norms of social relations and work on oneself increases. What grows at the same time is confusion in the area of models of personal and social development.⁷

This confusion contributes to the depreciation and devaluation of the term “We” and the elevation of “Me” in relation biographies.

In the 1980s the *Polityka* weekly featured an article which characterised the Polish model of women in 1980–1989, according to which women “dream of a rich husband and a house with a garden, but they will shatter these dreams as soon as they realise how restrictive this model of life can be.”⁸ These years saw a growing popularity of “books with a heart,” that is “harlequins” describing pretty young women, having love affairs, aspiring to be treated subjectively in relations, escaping from the monotony of marriage and negotiating their own position in love relationships. Today dating sites and opinion forming crowds of therapists, experts and elites responsible for the so-called reflective model of emotional relationships, perform the role of a form of escape from real contacts. Thirty, forty years ago women escaping to the world of book romances usually refrained from making courageous, risky decisions about split-up, separation or

⁷ M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, “Socjalizacja akademicka w czasach nadmiaru. O socjalizacji w (akademickim) krajobrazie medialnym,” in: *Pedagogika w społeczeństwie – społeczeństwo w pedagogice*, ed. A. Matysiak-Błaszczczyk, E. Włodarczyk, Poznań 2016, pp. 195–200.

⁸ *Portrety kobiet i mężczyzn w środkach masowego przekazu oraz podręcznikach szkolnych*, ed. R. Siemińska, Warszawa 1997, p. 38.

divorce with their partner. Reading literature of this type was rather entertainment. Today the world of meetings with a virtual lover turned from entertainment into contacts engaging emotionally and time-consuming.

In the culture of Internet confidences individuals building up real relationships also make use of media space naturally, spontaneously and intentionally, which very often causes disorganisation and disturbs the former emotional and intimate life, which results in the break-up of the relation. The Internet and the world of technology offer a lot of opportunities to upload and download information about oneself and others, at the same time condemning users to “enforced” or unrealised “voyeurism”⁹ and peeping. Dating and social networking sites used by couples are a kind of databases about partners. Usually one positive or negative comment and even a word made public, for example on the Facebook networking site, causes a row and break-up of a real relationship. In Polish courts Internet infidelities cause divorces more and more often.

In the current of philosophical reflection on the technologising of culture, Rafał Ilnicki¹⁰ talks straight about the fact that every user of the online space has their own cibercultural habitus, that is “he or she uses the surrounding world in imitation of the technological world.” In accordance with this theory, the “Me” of an individual invests in the technologies of expressing oneself to a greater degree, wanting to exist in cyberculture. The devaluation of the community is the consequence of revealing only the outer Me, which relishes on various possibilities of retouching one’s identity, boasting mainly about achievements – also in love relationships. The real “Me” stops existing, and what follows is its disintegration when the real relationship loses its community character, as the narcissist individual quickly gets addicted to virtual flattery, and, what is worse, he or she wants to derive satisfaction from it.

The virtual world of encounters creates an illusion of a free individual, aspiring to find fulfilment in every sphere of life. What has

⁹ The term voyeurism refers to watching media situations and events which stirs imagination, triggering impulses (also the sexual ones) and cause the feelings of discomfort and frustration because of not being able to satisfy unreal and unattainable desires.

¹⁰ R. Ilnicki, “*Wirtualny habitus cyberkultury*,” *Hybris* 2015, no. 31, p. 137.

emerged as a result of the strong rationalisation of all human desires is a new type of relationships known as “exodus,” that is the ones escaping from true relations. These relationships have developed a certain pattern (*habitus*) of being together, in which they postpone a decision about stabilisation and marriage, and even a real meeting. They escape above all from traditional relation patterns, which restrict, and from fashion, which is becoming democratised. “Exodus”-type relationships make decisions based on paradoxes, preferring for example childlessness because of their love for children or Internet love relationships due to feeling lonely, being a single in the real life, but a public and admired couple in the virtual world.

“Exodus”-type relationships experience the associative function of the Internet in exchange for permanent and stable relations; virtual encounters are only their substitutes, offering a folklore of sensations, they boost self-esteem only with regard to the external image of individuals and couples. Couples with relations established and cultivated exclusively on the Internet, maintaining the type of relationship escaping from real meetings, have adopted and implemented the anthropotechnics imposed on them by the system. They isolate and emancipate themselves from the material surrounding, which they regard as something worse, less stimulating than e.g. a virtual meeting with a fantastic looking partner, attractive in every respect. It must be emphasised that online encounters are very engaging emotionally and in terms of time. Unceasing fantasising about the possibility of building up a flawless relationship is the toll of instilling the narcissist vision that the relation cannot be ordinary, for we have devoted too much time and energy to impress and make its uniqueness public. A system of virtual meetings assigns users to an appropriate model of appearance, the presentation of the individual’s image is retouched. What is hidden under the appearance of attractive, emancipatory, courageous individuals is a strongly homogenised world of thoughts, values, and even looks. It turns out that in the promise of emphasising distinctive differences the online world makes individuals and couples indistinguishable from a given circle, group, portal. What happens in this homogenous world of excess, overload, wealth of information about us, about others, is the weakening and running out of emotional vigilance. It is no wonder that personal and family tragedies: split-ups, divorces, harm and traumatic experiences are so

often caused by virtual relations, which require more and more reflection and professional social support.

Research carried out by Marta Majorek in 2015 documenting You Tube codes in terms of the participation culture and creativity culture shows with an enormous concern that intimate and personal information, usually starting with an innocent self-presentation among teenagers and young people up to thirty years old, very often shocks with erotic information included.

A lot of space [on the Internet, and to be more precise You Tube – M.Ś-M.] is devoted to the problem of presenting women as objects whose function is to satisfy men's sexual needs. One does not have to have special skills to find thousands of films which, as it seems, reflect this view. It is enough to click several times to be able to watch amateur recordings of women dancing but also films containing images far from it. This concerns recordings in which the performers manifest their sexuality in a video with a striptease ... However, are videos of this type only a manifestation of treating women as objects, should one be directed by the viewers' comments with misogynist content or should one change their point of view and attitude to such performances?¹¹

Taking the above into account, sexual closeness, or rather the conversion of physical closeness to the virtual one, separated from emotions, is only an escape. It causes personal dramas, heightening loneliness and the depersonalisation of interpersonal relations. Like the mythological Narcissus, looking at his own reflection on end, who in fact terribly feared rejection and was not happy.

Individual narcissism and social narcissism

Liberal societies organised around consumerism and pleasure impose on individuals all forms of narcissistic behaviour, such as a fascination with fame, celebrating one's achievements, the short-term character and lack of stable place of residence or work awaken expectations in the community, not guaranteeing their satisfaction. On the one hand, they provoke people to look for happiness regardless of the cost, and on the other they reject the feeling of weakness, helplessness and compassion for others.

¹¹ M. Majorek, *Kod YouTube. Od kultury partycypacji do kultury kreatywności*, Kraków 2015, pp. 124–125.

What is clearly emphasised while diagnosing the syndrome of narcissistic personalities in personality psychology¹² is the disintegration of the weak “Me” of an individual living in permanent fear and under threat of being attacked, who is envious, despises virtues and goods of others, is terribly afraid of being rejected, but often provokes it with its aggression. It has a completely different image outwardly, is insincere and swollen-headed with various great services, seems to be strong and invincible. Culture narcissism effectively convinces others about its uniqueness, originality and disinterestedness, under the appearance of free choice it treats the society to a strongly instrumented market choice.

Distinctive features of individual narcissism include a conviction of being unique and great and continuous aspirations to acquire admiration and arouse jealousy of the surroundings. Narcissistic individuals feed on the visions of their success, power, wealth, at the expense of their and others’ emotionality; they want to achieve perfection in every area. The aim of an individual is exclusively to realise their own “Me,” and the same time not being able to understand the needs of other people. Any requirement imposed by the people around is interpreted by a narcissistic individual as enslavement and restriction of his or her freedom and space. The extreme type of narcissism can be compared with solipsism (Latin *solus ipse* – alone self), a philosophical view in which the subject can see only himself or herself, deserves absolute admiration, worship, awe and being treated subjectively, at the same time treating everyone around as objects.

The era of “Me”¹³ abounds in individual ideas, which completely ignore the socio-cultural context, at the same time the same individual projects do not hold the identity of couples together, but only elevate the individual’s ego. It is clear in therapeutic ways of saving the couples that, paradoxically, in the case of individualism destroying relationships from within use methods aiming to only repair and support the individual’s value and ego.

That being so, narcissism as a source of human’s individual disorders corresponds to cultural narcissism. This has happened above

¹² *Psychologia zachowań osobowości. Wybrane zagadnienia*, ed. L. Cierpiałkowska, Poznań 2004.

¹³ Term used by U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernheim in: *Miłość na odległość. Modele życia w epoce globalnej*, trans. M. Sutowski, Warszawa 2013.

all as result of the atrophy of direct socialisation, the source of which are: family, school, peers. The contemporary society, in which young people, left to their own resources, have to prepare themselves to fulfil social roles, contributes to the emergence of narcissistic attitudes. Young people draw their knowledge from never-ending media ideas for the “best, most original self-image,” which make one ceaselessly follow what is topical and replace the existing values with the new ones, focussing mainly on possessing. Furthermore, the spreading of narcissistic views in culture makes empathy to social injustice impossible, inhibits reaction to any problems of others, which do not provoke reflection. An approach like this also drives back self-criticism effectively. What is on the pedestal of choices is the individual satisfaction of desires and “ostensible” freedom.

The culture of narcissism thus contributes to the social distance. Under the influence of working on oneself, self-analyses and independence, “free” individual focuses rather on collecting individual sensations, also in the civil partnerships. To cite Wojciech J. Burszta,

... a contemporary narcissist is up to his or her ears in the consumerist ideology, he or she fights incessantly so that he or she and his or her family have more and better, and the competition with others makes one pay special attention to take care of their own status, lifestyle and subjective identity, based on subjective fetishism.¹⁴

Similarly, as correctly observed by this author, the culture of narcissism causes an identity muddle, confuses the terms of the “Me” identity and personality with the experience of ego.

The individual’s ego is changeable, adjusted to the social reception and the models of building relations found in a given culture. The ego often experiences a short-lived relation, based on love affairs, or the so-called friendship with a plus (that is a friendship with a one-night stand). The true identity, personality and relationship are built in a real and constant contact with other nearest and dearest, so they cannot be treated as a set of experiences and projects to achieve and then to abandon for “more attractive” ideas.

Focussing on oneself as a dominant feature promoted by the culture of narcissism makes one look at a relationship in the category

¹⁴ W.J. Burszta, *Narcyzm, kontrkultura i styl życia. W stronę kulturoznawstwa krytycznego*, in: cyfroteka.pl/katalog/ebooki/ [accessed on 6.08.2015].

of goods, in which one should invest, and if investment is not profitable, constantly exchange, as if in a commercial transaction. Relationships more and more often take advantage of the Internet advice offered by a love coach, whose task is to virtually teach the skills of love and satisfy the need of being loved. In their work with a client love coaches concentrate on changing an attitude to seeking a partner and building the person's value. It is the love coach that defines "healthy" relations, that is the happy ones, which give satisfaction. The problem is that strong concentration of a person, his or her desires, overcoming barriers, fears and continuous observation of an individual teaches narcissistic rather than partnership scripts of being together. Contemporary couples are effectively convinced of the rightness and necessity of adding variety to a relationship, of the fact that it cannot lose its attractiveness, understood in the category of possessing (a handsome and rich male partner, sexy female partner, a hundred-percent mother, wife, successful sex life, fulfilment), and all this can be achieved on condition of working with a coach. Jean Twenge,¹⁵ an American scholar studying the "Generation We," has found with terror that over the last twenty years the level of narcissism among young people who are not able to realistically assess themselves and their own needs and select needs in an incompetent way has increased by sixty-five percent. The scholar blames this fact on the effective mechanisms of the culture of the narcissistic praising and awarding individuals that do not deserve it. At the same time unbridled self-confidence and focus on one's own image improved by the brand, fashion and possessing more often concern servile individuals who uncritically drink in trends imposed on them by the media, and their number in the society is increasing (culture narcissism deprives of self-criticism).

Therefore the mechanism which drives the culture of narcissism is the market and advertising and their overwhelming possibilities to meddle in the values, depreciating knowledge, intelligence and wisdom, and putting the cult of youth, possessing and above all the "salutary" role of admiration and renown on a pedestal. Alain Touraine, who examines the social life, has rightly observed that "Elevating

¹⁵ J.M. Twenge, W. Keith, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, New York 2009.

private life to the rank of a public matter is today one of the most popular stratifying factors, so no wonder it is also one the most desired privileges.”¹⁶

Much attention is devoted to the questions about the style of life, once defined as character features allowing certain reactions and behaviours (after Alfred Adler), today understood rather in the categories of success, possessing and publicising “who I am.” On social networking sites one may put to test: one’s own image, physical and mental state, one’s own though changeable lifestyle. A typical individual with narcissistic disorders, living in a culture filled with narcissistic visions, wants to shine among the people around him or her, fulfilling each role in an instrumental way and wants to be seen and admired regardless of his or her and others’ feelings. At the same time he or she believes his or her behaviour is original, worthy of admiration and imitation. Writing about narcissism, Magdalena Szpunar¹⁷ and Beata Świątek¹⁸ unanimously state that individual’s narcissism may disturb the entire social life and spread to the whole cultures entangled in the ecstasy of impressions, shocking and admiring at the same time.

Conclusion

Social pedagogy, whose mission comes down to helping, does not narrow its research and scholarly activity only to the representatives of the groups: the poor, the homeless, the unemployed and the lonely ones. The questions posed by social pedagogy at present go far beyond social aid and the welfare system, showing a new area of support for family relations in the situation of cultural changes.

Social pedagogues studying the family more and more often emphasise individual and socio-cultural changes connected with the technologising of life, which affect the quality and shape of love and experienced problems in relationships and family relations.

¹⁶ A. Touraine, *Po kryzysie*, trans. M. Frybes, Warszawa 2013, p. 319.

¹⁷ M. Szpunar, “Od narcyzmu jednostki do kultury narcyzmu,” *Kultura – Media – Teologia* 2014, no. 18, pp. 106–116.

¹⁸ B. Świątek, “Narcyzm jako źródło zaburzeń orientacji życiowych człowieka,” in: *Narcyzm*, ed. J. Sieradzan, Białystok 2011, p. 187.

The whole network of social problems related to sexting, sponsoring, prostitution, cyberviolence and cyberpornography is not a task exclusively for the professional psychological support. It is actually all institutional-cultural structures, among others the triunity of educational spheres: family – school (also higher education institutions) – peers that are held responsible for the content and transfer of the axionormative sphere.

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