

No Evidence for ‘Narcissism Epidemic’ Among College Students

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Today’s college students are slightly less narcissistic than their counterparts were in the 1990s, researchers report in a new study – not significantly more, as some have proposed. The findings will be published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

The researchers analyzed data from 1,166 students at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1990s, and from tens of thousands of students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of California, Davis in the 2000s and 2010s. All of the students completed the Narcissism Personal Inventory (NPI), the oldest and most widely used measure of narcissism.

According to some researchers and observers, recent generations of young people are suffering through an epidemic of narcissism characterized by an exaggerated sense of their own gifts and accomplishments and by the expectation that others recognize their greatness. The rise in narcissism is believed to be the result of permissive parenting, unregulated access to the internet, and an overuse of social media platforms that reward self-aggrandizement, said University of Illinois psychology professor Brent Roberts, who led the new analysis.

But there is no compelling evidence that recent generations are more narcissistic than previous ones, he said.

The Narcissism Personality Inventory is designed to measure an individual’s narcissistic tendencies.

Each of its 40 questions asks participants to choose between two statements that define their attitudes and beliefs. One of each pair of answers is more consistent with a narcissistic outlook.

For example, the two answers in a pair might read: “I just want to be reasonably happy” and “I want to amount to something in the eyes of the world.” Another pair might read: “I insist on getting the respect that is due me” and “I usually get the respect that I deserve.”

Roberts and his colleagues first focused on whether the NPI reliably measured the same traits over time and among different constituencies.

“For the most part, the measure worked pretty well, but we found a few items that didn’t work consistently across different groups,” Roberts said. “When you adjust for that, you see decreases in narcissism from the 1990s to the 2000s to the 2010s.”

The team next looked at specific aspects of narcissism, such as leadership, vanity, and entitlement, and saw a similar downward trend in each of these traits between 1992 and 2015. The declines were small but significant, and occurred gradually over time. Males and females, Asians, African-Americans, and Caucasians all saw decreases in narcissism, but to differing degrees, Roberts said.

“The average college student scores 15 to 16 on the NPI scale, out of a possible 40,” Roberts said. “The average grandparent scores about 12. Based on that, if you use that as a natural metric, most people are not narcissists. And, perhaps most interestingly, narcissism declines with age.”

Roberts and his colleagues believe that older adults like the idea of a narcissism epidemic among the young because young people tend to be more narcissistic than they are.

“We have faulty memories, so we don’t remember that we were rather self-centered when we were that age,” Roberts said.

The denigration of millennials and even younger generations paints them as lacking in values or as having bad personality characteristics, he said.

“But that’s just wrong,” he said. “The kids are all right. There never was a narcissism epidemic, despite what has been claimed.”