

# Narcissism Unleashed

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They can be self-centered, arrogant or cocky. They seem charming at first, but later turned out to be intensely self-absorbed. They may be supremely confident in their abilities but turn out to be incompetent — and blame other people for their failures.

Narcissists must perform a variety of mental and social gymnastics to protect their grandiose views of themselves. They seek attention and admiration. They build splashy, often exaggerated profiles on Facebook. They play games in relationships. And they lash out at anyone who criticizes them.

But can an entire culture be narcissistic? Evidence points to that very trend, placing narcissism in the category of an epidemic — a disease spreading at a higher rate than usual.

The construct of cultural narcissism has been with us for decades, most notably in the work of cultural historian Christopher Lasch (*The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979). Cultural narcissism is reflected in TV shows and song lyrics, as well as widespread tendencies toward vanity, materialism, entitlement, and fame-seeking. We have documented increases in a range of these cultural markers; these changes are typically larger than the increases in individual narcissism.

## Evidence for Increasing Narcissism Among Individuals

Studies of narcissism have looked at the prevalence of the trait from both developmental and generational perspectives. A 2008 study of a nationally representative sample of US citizens used interviews to assess lifetime prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), the most serious form of individual narcissism. The researchers found that Americans in their 20s were three times as likely as people over age 60 to have experienced NPD in their lifetimes. Another approach compares real-time self-reports of narcissism among similar-aged people, such as college students, across several decades. This keeps the results from being skewed by age or distorted memory. These studies also show increasing narcissism. Traits related to narcissism have also increased. For example, younger

generations are more likely to:

- rate themselves as above average on leadership and drive to achieve;
- score lower on measures of empathy;
- embrace life goals centering on money, fame, and image;
- set unrealistically high goals; and
- report higher levels of self-esteem.

The tendency to focus on the self, and to “show off,” is in many ways becoming a social norm.

## **It’s All in a Name**

In fact, some people are setting themselves apart through their offspring. Drawing from 325 million names from the Social Security Administration database, we found that the names parents give their children are becoming increasingly unique. In the 1940s, about one in three boys had one of the top 10 most popular names; today that number has shrunk to one in nine (Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010). In fact, in many circles — particularly among celebrities — it’s no longer fashionable to use names as names. In June 2013, Kim Kardashian and Kanye West named their daughter North. Actress Gwyneth Paltrow and her husband, musician Chris Martin, have a daughter named Apple.

Another target of research has been pronoun usage. In both the corpus of 5 million books housed by Google and the lyrics of Billboard Top 10 songs, the use of first person singular (I, me, mine) has grown, while the use of first person plural (we, us, our) has declined. Many other data points show a similar pattern.

- Medical cosmetic procedures, including surgeries, have increased dramatically since the 1990s.
- Houses have expanded to encompass more rooms for individual activities.
- Religion has become much more personal, with increases in the popularity of “prosperity theology,” “cafeteria” style religions, and individual reports of direct experiences with the divine.

Consumer culture also illustrates the spread of self-focus, whether it’s watching a barista at Starbucks taking a five-step custom order, people sitting around a restaurant table with each on his or her iPhone, or a customized pizza restaurant like YourPie.

In a sense, narcissism is the dark side of individualism — freedom without responsibility, relationships without personal sacrifice, and positive self-views without grounding in reality.

What comes next? How will narcissism further evolve? In order to maintain elevated self-views in a world with the standard economic and social pathways blocked, individuals will need to migrate into

other social realms that are less constrained by reality. For example, individuals could move to online social realities where they can succeed (e.g., social networking, gaming, Reddit), fantasy or “geek” subcultures (e.g., science fiction, live action role-playing), or other alternatives. In essence, growing income inequality in the real world could lead a population of narcissists to feed their self-views in fantasy cultures.

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