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## MOVING BEYOND PARENTS IN THE ETIOLOGY OF NARCISSISTIC TRAITS

JASON J. WASHBURN AND LEAH D. PASKAR

The core features of narcissism have been thoroughly discussed in the preceding chapters. What stands out from this discussion is the apparent importance of interpersonal processes in the development and maintenance of narcissism. The interpersonal nature of narcissism stands in sharp contrast to other conceptualizations of self, such as global feelings of self-esteem, that largely involve internal thoughts and feelings (Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004). Because an individual with low self-esteem may experience self-deprecating cognitions, depressive affect, and withdrawn behavior without ever interacting with others, the manifestations of high or low self-esteem do not require interaction with others.

### APPLICATION OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARCISSISM

How are narcissistic traits influenced by social systems throughout the life span? Ecological systems theory, initially conceptualized by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), suggests that human development is influenced by multiple interpersonal and social systems. Bronfenbrenner proposed that four social

systems influence child development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The *microsystem* includes people or organizations that have direct and immediate contact with the child (e.g., caregivers, siblings, school). The *mesosystem* is the interaction of two or more microsystems, such as a parent interacting with the school. The *exosystem* includes people or organizations with which the child does not often directly interact but that influence the child's development (e.g., community, parental workplace, extended family members). Finally, the *macrosystem* is the child's larger socio-cultural context, with which the child does not directly interact but that has an influence on the child nonetheless. This chapter examines and explores the development of narcissism within some of these systems (for a discussion of parental influences, see Chapter 7, this volume).

### MACROSYSTEM CONTRIBUTORS TO NARCISSISM: CULTURAL FACTORS

Theorists and researchers have also examined how factors within the macrosystem contribute to the development of narcissism. In the last several decades, numerous theorists and social commentators have argued that the dominating culture in the United States increasingly promotes narcissistic qualities. For example, in his 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, historian Christopher Lasch argued that the "Me Decade" (Wolfe, 1976) of the 1970s increasingly encouraged individualism, self-focus, and self-aggrandizement.

The self-esteem movement of the last several decades has also been implicated in the rise of narcissistic traits in youth (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). As a continuation of the Me Decade, the self-esteem movement began in earnest in the 1980s, with the hopes of solving a plethora of academic, social, and mental health problems (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). With a focus on indiscriminately increasing self-esteem, regardless of evidence of low self-esteem, the self-esteem movement has been criticized not only for being ineffective in producing the purported outcomes but also for inflating self-esteem to the point of generating feelings of superiority, entitlement, and exploitativeness in some (Baumeister et al., 2003). In other words, the self-esteem movement has been criticized for possibly encouraging the development of narcissistic traits across a generation of youth (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

Although cultural pundits and social scientists will continue to debate the benefits and costs of promoting self-esteem (Kwan, Kuang, & Zhao, 2008), recent evidence has suggested that narcissistic traits may be on the rise in the United States. Twenge et al. (2008) caused a stir in the academic community and lay public when they published findings suggesting an increase in

narcissism over a 25-year period. On the basis of 85 samples of college students in the United States, they found that Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) scores increased 0.33 standard deviations from the early 1980s to 2006, a moderate and significant effect size. Current college students, on average, scored two points higher on the NPI when compared with their contemporaries in the early 1980s. Although the notion that narcissistic traits are rising with each successive generation among youth and emerging adults has been challenged (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008), the findings of Twenge et al. (2008) certainly raise the question of how the changing dominant culture of the United States affects the development and expression of narcissistic traits within individuals.

Cross-cultural or cross-national studies lend further credence to the position that culture has an influence on narcissistic traits. These studies generally focus on differences between cultures or nations that have predominantly individualistic or collectivistic orientations. In individualistic cultures, people compose the basic, core unit of the society, and the society's purpose is to promote the individual's well-being. People are perceived as separate from each other. In contrast, collectivistic cultures perceive people as interconnected; the group is the basic, core unit of the society. Society's purpose is to promote the group's well-being, rather than the individual's well-being (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

People from nations with more individualistic orientations have been found to have greater narcissistic traits than people in collectivistic-oriented nations (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). For example, people from individualistic-oriented cultures, such as the United States, are more likely to emphasize positive over negative aspects of the self (i.e., self-enhancement), whereas people from collectivistic-oriented cultures, such as Japan or Singapore, are more likely to be modest and engage in self-criticism (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Kurman & Sriram, 2002). An Internet study of 3,445 participants completing the NPI found that people in countries with more individualistic cultures scored higher on the Authority, Superiority, and Self-Sufficiency subscales than people in countries with more collectivist cultures (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003).

The broad differentiation between collectivism and individualism may obscure differences that exist even between cultures with similar orientations. For example, differences in narcissistic traits are found even between cultures that share collectivistic orientations. One study found that whereas Americans have higher narcissistic traits than Japanese, Chinese have higher narcissistic traits than Americans (Fukunishi et al., 1996). Differences are also evident within specific cultures. For example, within the collectivistic-oriented Thai society, those with higher narcissistic traits were found to be more attracted to high-status and admiring romantic partners than those with lower narcissistic

traits (Tanchotsrinon, Maneesri, & Campbell, 2007). Variations of narcissistic traits within cultures with collectivistic orientations may reflect individual variation in the valuation of individualism (Ghorbani, Watson, Krauss, Bing, & Davison, 2004). For example, people with more personally individualistic orientations who live within a collectivistic culture have been shown to be at increased risk of developing pathological narcissistic traits (Caldwell-Harris & Aycicegi, 2006).

Differences in narcissistic and related traits among racial and ethnic groups within the United States have also been observed. Foster et al. (2003) found that African Americans had the highest rates of narcissistic traits of any racial/ethnic group. This finding is consistent with racial/ethnic differences in self-esteem, which generally find that African Americans have the highest reported levels of self-esteem, whereas Asians have the lowest reported levels of self-esteem (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

Racial/ethnic differences in narcissistic traits may reflect subcultural variations of the dominant, individualistic-oriented culture of the United States. One problem, however, with proposing differences in norms and values across racial/ethnic groups is the great heterogeneity found within racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Despite existing attempts to categorize people into racial/ethnic groups, there is no singular African American, Asian, Hispanic, or non-Hispanic White group or subculture. Within each social construction of race/ethnicity exists many specific groupings of people who share a variety of different characteristics (Brown, Seller, Brown, & Jackson, 1999). For example, the *Hispanic* group includes persons from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican. The term *African American* captures persons of African and Caribbean descent, as well as persons whose families have lived in the United States for generations. Furthermore, these social constructions are composed of people who form numerous additional subgroups on the basis of factors other than race or ethnicity, such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, political orientation, religious beliefs, personal interests, and so on. As a result, people may share more in common with those people outside of their racial/ethnic group than within it. To really understand differences among these groups, it is our contention that the unit of analysis needs to be more specific than “culture” or “subculture,” while also being broader than the immediate family.

#### NEIGHBORHOOD INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARCISSISM

It remains unknown how the development of narcissistic traits is influenced by microsystems outside of the family, such as an individual’s neighborhood. How do the local norms and values of the neighborhood encourage or

discourage the development of narcissistic traits? Are certain neighborhood contexts more encouraging or discouraging of narcissistic traits? Are there specific features of neighborhoods that influence specific features of narcissism?

### Code of the Streets

Take, as an example, the particular urban environment described by sociologist Elijah Anderson. In *The Code of the Streets* (Anderson, 1999, 2002), Anderson used an ethnographic methodology to describe a poor urban environment in which interpersonal behavior in the neighborhood context is directed by a set of neighborhood norms and values that fall outside that of the dominant culture in the United States. Anderson proposed that these rules for interpersonal behavior, referred to as the “code of the streets,” are critical for safely navigating urban neighborhoods plagued by interpersonal violence and aggression. Failure to follow the code can result in interpersonal violence from residents of the neighborhood, both adults and youth, who follow and enforce the code.

The concept of respect is the cornerstone of the code of the streets. Respect is an elusive concept and difficult to define; however, *respect* generally refers to being treated in the “right” way and given deference by others (Anderson, 1999). In this neighborhood context, respect is vulnerable; there is a constant risk of losing respect or having it taken away. As a consequence, respect is defended at all costs. Even the slightest form of disrespect, such as maintaining eye contact too long, may communicate violent intentions (Anderson, 2002). As a result, individuals navigating neighborhood contexts that are governed by the code are exceedingly sensitive to even the slightest form of implied disrespect.

The code guides the presentation and behavior of an individual when interacting in the neighborhood. For example, self-image is critical for gaining respect. In this neighborhood context, an individual must present an image that demands respect at all times. This image is created through behavioral and interpersonal presentation, personal looks, and displays of valuable possessions, such as clothing, jewelry, and vehicles.

To defend this image, an individual must convey, verbally and nonverbally, as well as directly and indirectly, a predisposition to violence if and when respect is not provided. Disrespect, whether perceived or actual, must be answered; if not, one becomes a target for others. As stated by Anderson (2002), the individual “must ‘keep himself straight’ by managing his position of respect among others; this involves in part his self-image, which is shaped by what he thinks others are thinking of him in relation to his peers” (p. 195).

How is the development of narcissism affected when a child is born into a neighborhood context governed by the code of the streets? According to

ecological system theory, the code of the streets would influence child development at the microsystem and exosystem levels. Whereas the child's direct interactions with people in the neighborhood operate at the level of the microsystem, the code by which those interactions are governed is shaped by factors in the exosystem. In other words, the code of the streets, which influences microsystem interactions, developed as a cultural adaptation to factors at the level of the exosystem, such as chronic poverty, the illegal drug trade, persistent racial discrimination, community disorganization, and alienation from the mainstream community (Anderson, 1999). Consistent with ecological systems theory, the effects of these exosystemic factors filter through multiple social systems to influence the child's daily social interactions at the level of the microsystem.

Contemporary theories of narcissism provide a template for understanding how these neighborhood-level factors could affect the development of narcissistic traits. For example, Morf and Rhodewalt's (2001) dynamic self-regulatory processing model of narcissism proposes that narcissism is characterized by the tension between two seemingly paradoxical components of the self: grandiosity and vulnerability. They proposed that although a narcissist has an exaggerated and inflated sense of self, that sense of self is also highly vulnerable and unstable. In attempts to maintain the grandiose sense of self, the narcissist continually seeks affirmation of the grandiose self through manipulation of the social environment (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). This strategy, however, is often ineffectual because the narcissist's vulnerability leads to adversarial and competitive behavior. By seeking to maintain her or his grandiose self, the narcissist often elicits negative feedback from others instead of the positive feedback he or she so greatly desires. Thus, a discrepancy emerges between the social feedback the narcissist receives and her or his illusive self-concept of grandiosity and superiority. The narcissist then tries harder to illicit positive affirmations to validate her or his grandiose self-concept, yet is continually disappointed because of the use of ineffectual interpersonal strategies (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Living in a neighborhood guided by the code of the streets would encourage the very traits of grandiosity and vulnerability discussed by Morf and Rhodewalt (2001). The need to portray a self-image that is "rough and tough," fearless, and demanding of constant respect might encourage an exaggerated sense of self and entitlement. The precarious nature of respect and the need to constantly earn or defend it would also make one's sense of self highly unstable and easily threatened. The sense of vulnerability, although dressed in grandiosity and bravado, would be pervasive and chronic in a context in which the threat of violence is constant.

According to Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), the stability of a narcissist's sense of self is dependent on the feedback he or she receives from others in

the social environment. The same is true in a street-oriented neighborhood: Respect and self-image are highly dependent on the responses of others. Further, the various ways to obtain and maintain respect and self-image in a street-oriented environment encourage interpersonal exploitativeness and lack of empathy. Maintaining respect could also encourage violent responses, similar to the process described by the theory of threatened egotism (Baumeister et al., 1996). According to this theory, narcissists use aggressive behavior when they believe their self-image or sense of respect is threatened or challenged. Aggression is used as a tool to reestablish their sense of self and/or to punish the specific source of the threat (Baumeister et al., 1996). Narcissists are more likely than those without these traits to interpret neutral behavior as threatening because of their highly vulnerable sense of self. Strikingly similar to what Anderson (1999) described, the narcissist may perceive an ego threat, for example, in a mild disagreement or in response to certain types of questions, when others do not.

Not all theorists believe that vulnerability is a central component of the narcissistic sense of self, and research has suggested that individuals high on narcissistic traits may not harbor a fragile sense of self (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007). Indeed, some argue that narcissism is best characterized by a grandiose sense of self that is antagonistic but not vulnerable or unstable (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Samuel & Widiger, 2008). Further, whereas vulnerability and fragile self-esteem are associated features of narcissistic personality disorder, they are not part of its diagnostic criteria according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.; American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

These discrepant theories and findings on the role of vulnerability in narcissism likely reflect the multiple dimensions and manifestations of the construct (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Washburn et al., 2004). For example, a recent study identified three clinical subtypes of narcissism: the grandiose/malignant narcissist, the fragile narcissist, and the high-functioning/exhibitionistic narcissist (Russ, Shedler, Bradley, & Westen, 2008). An individual within the grandiose/malignant subtype is characterized by anger, interpersonal manipulativeness, desire for power and control over others, lack of remorse, self-importance, and entitlement but without underlying vulnerability or inadequacy. An individual within the fragile narcissist subtype is also characterized by grandiosity but differs from the grandiose/malignant narcissist in that her or his grandiosity serves to defend against underlying vulnerability and inadequacy. When those defenses are not adequate, an individual with this subtype is likely to display anger. Individuals within the high-functioning/exhibitionistic subtype also display grandiosity, in addition to attention seeking and competitive self-importance, but these features are tempered by their psychological strengths and charming, outgoing, and motivated

personality style. Hence, this subtype uses narcissism as a vehicle for success (Russ et al., 2008).

Within a street-oriented environment, several factors may converge to create these different narcissistic subtypes. Take, for example, the mitigating factor of parenting style, which interacts with the influences of the neighborhood context at the level of the mesosystem. Anderson (1999) argued that all children living in neighborhoods ruled by the code of the streets must learn the code to survive. Even parents who do not endorse the code of the streets must teach their children to follow the code, at least while interacting in the neighborhood. Yet, parents can mitigate the influence of the code on their children's developing personality and sense of self. For example, they can teach their children to follow dominant norms and values while in other contexts (e.g., within the family, school, and church). Alternatively, parents can reinforce the code of the streets at home. Anderson (2002) proposed that by adolescence, depending on the family context, children who grow up in a street-oriented neighborhood either integrate the code into their sense of self or learn to follow the code when necessary while also integrating more dominant or normative values into their self-concept. Those children who have parents who encouraged the code of the streets both at home and in the neighborhood would be at greater risk of developing traits associated with grandiose/malignant narcissism in adolescence. In contrast, those children who experience the protective influence of parents teaching dominant norms and values would appear to be more likely to develop traits associated with high-functioning/exhibitionistic narcissism.

It is also possible that children living in a neighborhood guided by the code of the streets, but who are raised by parents who promote mainstream or dominant cultural values and norms, may develop a combination of grandiose/malignant, high-functioning/exhibitionistic, and fragile narcissistic traits. Similar to the concept of biculturalism in the acculturation literature (Birman, 1998), the demands of specific neighborhood or peer contexts may make specific types of narcissistic traits more or less salient. For example, these youth may be more likely to display high-functioning/exhibitionistic traits in contexts that encourage mainstream norms and values (e.g., church, classroom, prosocial peer groups), grandiose/malignant traits in contexts that follow the code of the streets but also provide a degree of security (e.g., hanging out with street-oriented but supportive peers), and fragile narcissistic traits in street-oriented contexts that provide little sense of security (e.g., interacting with antisocial peers and street-oriented adults). Consequently, the narcissistic traits encouraged by the code of the streets may be best viewed not as discrete categories or groups but rather on a continuum of personality characteristics that can manifest differently in a variety of contexts and interpersonal situations.



Numerous other factors likely moderate the influence of street-oriented neighborhoods on the manifestations of narcissistic traits. For example, a child with a high genetic loading for antisocial behavior (Kendler & Prescott, 2006), especially for psychopathic traits (Larsson et al., 2007), will be at greater risk of developing grandiose/malignant narcissistic traits in a street-oriented neighborhood, regardless of the home environment created by the parents. In contrast, children with genetic loadings for anxiety and depression would be at greater risk of developing fragile narcissistic traits. Such youth may experience cognitive dissonance between the illusions of grandeur that they incorporate into their self-image and the harsh reality of their vulnerability. Thus, they may vacillate between the ego states of grandiosity, self-doubt, and depression.

### **Code of the Silver Spoon?**

One specific neighborhood context was presented in this chapter; however, other neighborhood contexts may also influence the development of narcissistic traits. For example, how would other extreme neighborhood contexts, such as a sheltered, wealthy, suburban community, contribute to the development of these traits? In contrast to a street-oriented neighborhood, a more privileged community would provide a protected environment that is free from the threat of physical violence and that strongly supports the individualistic values of the mainstream culture. Yet, similar to the street-oriented neighborhood, respect and self-image may also be of paramount importance in such a community. For example, how would an emphasis on academic and professional achievement, physical appearance, and social standing in such a community influence the developing self? Indeed, narcissistic traits such as exhibitionism, grandiosity, self-importance, and demands for attention may be actively encouraged as a protection against the hypercompetitiveness of the neighborhood. Under optimal circumstances, these factors may facilitate an adaptive or high-functioning/exhibitionistic subtype of narcissism; under less than optimal circumstances, the pressure to conform and the constant threat of competition may lend itself to fragile narcissism or even the entitlement and exploitativeness of grandiose/malignant narcissism.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter proposes that research and theory on the development of narcissistic traits would benefit from examining etiologic factors beyond that of intrapsychic, parental, and macrocultural factors. Because development does not occur within a vacuum, we propose that the etiology of narcissistic

traits is influenced by multiple and interacting social systems. In sum, we argue that researchers and theorists interested in the development of narcissistic traits would do well to integrate an ecological perspective into their models.

Although this chapter argues for the importance of examining neighborhood factors in the development of narcissistic traits, other systems within the ecology of the developing child should be examined. For example, how do peer groups influence the development of narcissistic traits? Peers clearly have an increasing influence on development as the child ages into adolescence, a critical period for the developing sense of self (Erikson, 1963). The influence of peers on the development of narcissistic traits may occur in a similar way to the development of antisocial behavior (Snyder et al., 2008). For example, children with exhibitionist or exploitative interpersonal styles may run the risk of rejection from normatively developed peers, leading to greater affiliation with deviant peers who reinforce narcissistic traits.

This chapter raises a final question unanswered by the current literature: Are narcissistic traits necessarily personality disturbances? It is possible that what are labeled as narcissistic traits in some individuals may actually be behavioral, affective, and cognitive adaptations to a unique social context. As we have suggested, narcissistic traits may be necessary for survival in a street-oriented context, yet they may be labeled as pathological by researchers and clinicians. In a street-oriented context, those who display grandiose and malignant narcissistic traits may be the most functional; however, in a mainstream context, those same individuals may experience impairment. In this sense, traits that serve an adaptive function in one context may be a hindrance in another. It remains to be seen whether children raised in a street-oriented context have the capacity to selectively display narcissistic traits. Can these youth display narcissistic traits in a street-oriented context while not fully integrating these traits into their sense of self? As noted numerous times throughout this chapter, these questions remain in need of empirical answers.

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