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Media Features and Reviews

Media Review: The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement

Twenge, J. & Campbell, W. K. (2009). *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement*. New York, NY: Free Press. 352 pp. ISBN: 978-1-416575-98-6 (\$17.16 hardcover).

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The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement by Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell focuses on the rise of narcissism in the United States. The book presents the characteristics, development, and future impact on the nation of increased narcissism. The book serves as a starting point for the conversation concerning American culture and this personality epidemic. Specifically, Twenge and Campbell shed light on how a well-intentioned movement to foster higher self-esteem in young adults may have inadvertently created a culture of narcissism. They call attention to narcissism as an epidemic and propose that the first step to stopping this disease is to bring it to the forefront of discussion.

The heart of Twenge and Campbell's argument resides in addressing narcissism as a societal epidemic, rather than just an attribute of young adults. Their book is divided into four sections that describe the diagnosis, causes, symptoms, and prognosis and treatment for narcissism. In their diagnosis, Twenge and Campbell discuss the myths of narcissism, contending that narcissism is more than simply overcompensating for low self-esteem and that it extends beyond physical vanity. Twenge and Campbell share the history of the epidemic by chronicling societal and cultural markers from the 1960s onward. This cultural analysis is an effective transition into the second section, which addresses the causes of narcissism. The authors utilize a variety of cultural trends and changes to show U.S. society's narcissistic tendencies. For example, the book discusses

the demise of parenting and how children are granted the authority to make large family decisions such as purchasing a car. Twenge and Campbell also examine the rising popularity of social networking sites, arguing that they work as a feedback loop for narcissism. The authors present cultural arguments by discussing financial trends including easy credit and the U.S. society's tendency to purchase for pleasure.

In the third section of *The Narcissism Epidemic*, the authors address many of the symptoms of narcissism. They discuss issues ranging from spending habits and personal entitlement to the trend of selfish motives behind volunteerism. The authors' fourth section examines prognosis and treatment. This concluding section begins with a prognosis of the future of the narcissism epidemic and offers a variety of possible outcomes. The last chapter tackles solutions for this epidemic, ranging from individual changes such as quieting our egos and creating connections, all the way to large societal changes such as parenting practices and credit policies.

The Narcissism Epidemic is a well-researched, well-written piece that is inviting to readers. In order to provide evidence for the author's assertions, several different types of research are utilized, including sociological, psychological, anthropological, market trends, and cultural references—all reinforcing the authors' argument that narcissism is indeed an epidemic. The scope of this book extends beyond college students to all of U.S. society, making it a valuable read for a wide audience. The authors provide descriptive examples and visual aids where appropriate.

This book, however, could be improved with a more in-depth look at solutions. A sweeping treatment for this epidemic was missing, and the reader was therefore left curious about possible solutions for this problem. Twenge and Campbell dedicated 15 chapters to the discussion and explanation of the epidemic, but only one chapter was left to addressing prognosis and only one chapter discussed treatment options. The reader ends the book with an overwhelming sense of awareness of the problem, but with a limited amount of potential solutions to address the issue of narcissism.

The Narcissism Epidemic is the second book that Twenge authored concerning narcissism. She first published *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before* (2006), which was widely read in higher education and student affairs, allowing her to be a featured speaker at the 2010 Annual NASPA Conference in Chicago. While *Generation Me* focused on adolescents and young adults, *The Narcissism Epidemic* attributes these narcissistic tendencies to all ages. The book can provide insight for parents, co-workers, faculty, student affairs professionals, alumni, and community members. It gives readers an awareness of behavioral tendencies they can recognize in interactions with others and even tendencies within themselves. Specifically, some of the research provided by Twenge and Campbell examines young adults, allowing for student affairs professionals to gain insight into our main student population.

As student affairs professionals, we constantly strive to strike a balance between areas of challenge and support for our students (Sanford, 1968). An administrator may have already

experienced the backlash of narcissism when attempting to provide a challenging environment for students. If Twenge and Campbell's argument is true, then some of our students are being over-supported, without facing an adequate amount of challenge. This narcissism epidemic may influence students to avoid uncomfortable challenges, thereby having an impact on our educational work as student affairs administrators.

To fully understand the implications of this book and its connection to student affairs and higher education, Baylor University developed a Student Life Book Club centered on this text. The division of student affairs and other departments were invited to participate and books were provided to participants. Individuals from parent programming, legal counsel, and the health center along with student affairs professionals, higher education administrators, graduate students, and faculty members met once a month to discuss a section of the book. These discussions revolved around student conduct, community development, and issues with parents along with a variety of other situations. Participants brought real life examples to the problems presented in *The Narcissism Epidemic* and discussed solutions. Participants also had the opportunity to discuss issues specific to this campus, in light of narcissism, and engage in conversations with cross-campus partners to gain additional perspectives.

The Narcissism Epidemic is a valuable contribution to student affairs because it provides specific information about the origins of behaviors, what the actual behaviors of narcissism are, and a few ideas about how narcissism can be treated. Further, if the narcissism epidemic is a societal crisis like Twenge and Campbell argue, than this problem inherently becomes an issue for higher education. Higher education is vital to the development of contributing members of society, so it is important that individuals understand and recognize the narcissism epidemic and are aware of the problems that this epidemic has created in society.

References

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