COVER STORY

Reflecting on narcissism

Are young people more self-obsessed than ever before?

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Imagine a country where everyone acts like a reality show contestant — obsessed with power, status and appearance, and is comfortable manipulating others for their personal gain. “I’m here to win, not make friends,” would be the national motto.

This society would have high crime rates — white collar and violent — as people take whatever they feel entitled to, says Christopher Barry, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Southern Mississippi and lead editor of “Narcissism and Machiavellianism in Youth” (APA, 2010). Cosmetic surgery would be routine, materialism rampant, and everyone would seek fame or notoriety, he adds. It would also be a place with high rates of anxiety and depression. That’s because narcissists — people with an inflated sense of their importance and abilities — have trouble keeping friends, even though they are good at making them, Barry’s found.

“A narcissistic society would be a deeply lonely place,” Barry says.

According to some researchers, that is precisely where America is heading. Self-esteem is on the rise, with 80 percent of middle-school students scoring higher in self-esteem in 2006 than the average middle-school student in 1988, according to one study (in the *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 3). Among college students, subclinical levels of narcissism have steadily risen since the 1970s, other studies suggest. And though the diagnosis may be dropped from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (see Narcissism and the DSM), young people are much more likely than older adults to have ever experienced Narcissistic Personality Disorder, according to a large-scale epidemiological study published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (Vol. 67, No. 7).

“You can look at individual scores of narcissism, you can look at data on lifetime prevalence of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, you can look at related cultural trends, and they all point to one thing,” says W. Keith Campbell, PhD, head of the University of Georgia psychology department. “Narcissism is on the rise.”

Other psychologists question that claim. They challenge the methods and conclusions of Campbell and others and have found contradictory results in their own studies.

“Kids today are remarkably similar to previous generations, at least in terms of their traits and behaviors,” says Kali Trzesniewski, PhD, a narcissism researcher, meta-analysis expert, and psychology professor at the University of California, Davis. “They are just as narcissistic as we were at their age.”

Missing data

The disparate views stem from the fact that no one has conducted a definitive study of narcissism — one that compares, for example, whether a nationally representative sample of teens from the 1970s scores lower on narcissism than teens today. However, over the last three decades, thousands of college students have completed the Narcissism Personality Inventory for various unrelated studies. (The NPI asks people to choose between pairs of statements, such as, “I find it easy to manipulate people,” and “I don’t like it when I find myself manipulating people.”)

Campbell and San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge, PhD, analyzed NPI data from 85 studies and found that between 1982 and 2006, college students’ narcissism scores significantly increased by about two narcissistic answers (*Journal of Personality*, Vol. 76, No. 4). A follow-up study published last year added 22 new studies to the meta-analysis and found further increases in narcissism among college students through 2008, though

the increase in recent years wasn't quite as steep as it was in the 1990s (*Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1).

"Overall, we've seen a massive increase in narcissism among college students, but we may begin to see a leveling off, or scores may even begin to go down," says Twenge. One reason for the potential decline may be the financial crisis: Easy credit, she says, allowed people to present themselves as wealthy and powerful. "We've had some damping down of materialism since then, but a lot of other cultural forces — the Internet and parenting in particular — are still pushing in the direction of narcissism," Twenge says.

The Internet, Twenge claims, encourages people to constantly promote themselves — and broadcast the minutiae of their lives — on blogs and through social media. At the same time, today's parents work hard to engender high self-esteem in their children and the belief they are special. A case in point: Parents increasingly give their children uncommon names, according to data culled by Twenge and University of South Alabama psychology professor Joshua Foster, PhD, from the Social Security Administration's baby name database (*Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1). In the late 1880s, 40 percent of boys received one of the 10 most common names. Today, fewer than 10 percent do.

But some psychologists believe Twenge and Campbell have to face several methodological issues. Most concerning is that their NPI data come from convenience samples from a variety of different universities over a long time span, says Brent Donnellan, PhD, a psychology professor at Michigan State University. Over 30 years, the makeup of college students might have changed, the psychology students who participated in these studies may have become less representative of college students in general or perhaps some unknown factor influenced the results. "It's just not an ideal way to study changes over time," Donnellan says.

To address the critique of comparing scores across different campuses, Twenge and Foster analyzed NPI data from just the University of South Alabama. They found a three-point rise from 1994 to 2009.

Twenge also points out that the factors Donnellan mentions would have to change systematically to confound her data. The only factor that has shown such change, she says, is the kinds of people going to college. But while women and international students make up more of the college population today than in the 1980s, that shift should depress narcissism scores since women and international students tend to score lower on the NPI.

"It's remarkable that we've found this rise in narcissism despite the fact that more women and more international students are taking the test," she says.

Twenge, Campbell and their collaborators aren't the only people who have observed a rise in narcissism. One major epidemiological study, published in 2008 by researchers at the National Institutes of Health, found that 9.4 percent of Americans in their 20s had experienced Narcissistic Personality Disorder at some point in their life, compared with only 3.2 percent of people over 65 (*Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, Vol. 69, No. 7). The study was conducted through face-to-face interviews of a nationally representative sample of 34,653 adults, but the method the researchers used — asking people to think back on a lifetime of symptoms — isn't foolproof, says Donnellan.

"It's a controversial paper," he says, noting that the study's lifetime prevalence estimate of the disorder — 6.2 percent overall — is far higher than in previous studies, and that older people might be forgetting just how self-centered they used to be.

For Twenge, however, the steepness of the increase in narcissism makes up for that potential flaw. "There would have to be an awful lot of forgetting," she says, adding that the older people have had longer to experience the disorder, biasing the study in the opposite direction.

Teens today

While most studies on the topic do show generational increases in narcissism, that may be because studies that show statistically significant changes are more likely to be written up and published than those that show no change. However, one such study did find a home last year, in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (Vol. 5, No. 1). In it, Trzesniewski and Donnellan drew data from a nationally representative, annual survey of 50,000 high school students called "Monitoring the Future," which tracks the attitudes, behavior and values of America's youth. Though the survey, which is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, didn't measure narcissism directly, it investigated several related factors, including egoism, self-esteem, individualism and the importance of social status. On all of those measures, high school seniors in 1976 look just like those graduating in 2006.

The researchers did, however, find an increase in materialism (students were asked if they felt that "having a lot of money is important") from the 1970s through 1990, but that leveled off and then decreased slightly from 1990 to 2000.

"We really didn't find any evidence for the idea that young people are becoming more narcissistic," says Donnellan. "There's just so much individual variation — every generation has its narcissists and its selfless heroes. These

generational labels are pop psychology. They really aren't relevant for academic research or understanding personality development."

Alongside that study, however, ran a critique by Twenge and Campbell, who argued that Trzesniewski and Donnellan only investigated 15 percent of the data in the "Monitoring the Future" survey, misinterpreted many of their results and applied more stringent tests of effect size than necessary.

In response to those charges, Trzesniewski and Donnellan say that they did not cherry-pick the data, which are available to academic researchers at www.icpsr.umuch.edu. "However, implicit biases are perhaps a fact of life, and we encourage other researchers to fully exploit the 'Monitoring the Future' and other existing data sets to evaluate the strength of the evidence for generational changes for themselves," says Trzesniewski.

Nothing new?

Whether kids today are more narcissistic than previous generations clearly continues to be a topic of hot debate — and it will be until someone conducts that definitive study, says Richard Eibach, PhD, a psychology professor at Yale University.

Further clouding the debate, says Eibach, is a quirk of human nature — the tendency to mistake change in yourself for change in the world. As people age, they often become more conscientious, making young people seem self-centered in contrast, Eibach has found.

"I might compare my behavior as an adult to people younger than me, but the more relevant comparison would be what I was like when I was their age," he says.

At the same time, people become less open to new experience as they grow older, so young people's interest in technologies such as Twitter and Facebook may seem incomprehensible to older generations, he says. That makes it easy to latch on to the idea that there's something essentially different about the younger generation.

"The common complaint about these social media technologies is that people are becoming more self-absorbed and narcissistic, and that it's going to tear at the fabric of society when people form these trivial connections with others, rather than participating in their communities and having rich interactions," he says. "But these complaints are the same ones people made generations ago about the telephone and automobile."

According to Twenge, however, the telephone and automobile have had the very effects Eibach mentions.

"People in the 1970s did feel more disconnected from others than those in earlier eras, and were involved less in their communities, and it's very likely that happened because they were not seeing others in person as much," she says.

The fact that complaints about narcissistic youth have been long-running, Twenge adds, doesn't mean these fears are unfounded. "America's been sliding into self-obsession for a very long time," she says.

FURTHER READING

- Barry, C.T., Kerig, P.K., Stellwagen, K.K., & Barry, T.D. (Eds.). (2011). Narcissism and Machiavellianism in youth: Implications for the development of adaptive and maladaptive behavior. Washington, D.C.: APA.
- Trzesniewski, K.H. & Donnellan, M.B. (2010). Rethinking "Generation Me": A study of cohort effects from 1976–2006. *Perspectives in Psychological Science*, 5, 58–75.
- Twenge, J.M., & Campbell, W.K. (2009). The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement. New York: Free Press.