

Narcissism: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Since the 1990's the issue of school safety has been forced into the spotlight by extreme cases of school violence, most notably, shootings occurring on school campuses. These incidents of extreme violence have been prevalent across the spectrum of school settings. In March 1998, four students and a teacher were killed outside of Westside Middle School, as the building was evacuated for a false fire alarm. On April 20, 1999, 14 students were killed and 22 were injured during a shooting at Columbine High School. In February 2000, a six year old student was killed at Buell Elementary School by a same age peer. On April 17, 2007, the deadliest school shooting to date occurred at Virginia Tech where 32 students were killed and 15 wounded before the gunman killed himself. Tragically, since 1996, 95 people have been killed and 128 wounded in school shootings in the United States alone ("A Timeline of Recent Worldwide Shootings", 2007). A plethora of research has emerged focusing on answering the question that many individuals are asking, "what specific causes lead students to respond through such violent acts?"

This is a complex question which continues to challenge our society, but interestingly, some of the reports on the Virginia Tech shooter described his narcissistic behavior as the driving force behind his actions (Time, 2007). Obviously, we are not in a position to confirm or deny a cause for any of these school shootings, but research suggests that the characteristics of narcissistic behavior can be directly linked to acts of aggression (Baumeister, Catanese, & Wallace, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003; Washburn, McMahon, King, Reinecke, & Silver, 2004). Thus, it is important to look at a definition of narcissism, and the good, bad, and ugly that may accompany this behavior

disorder. As these factors are addressed it will become obvious the impact this disorder may have on our society, as well as our schools.

*What is Narcissism?*

Narcissism refers to a normal personality trait that differs between people rather than the personality disorder as identified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV – R (DSM-IV-R). Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is characterized by arrogance, grandiosity, and self-importance; a preoccupation with fantasies of success and power; a conviction that one is special or unique; a desire to receive the admiration of others; a sense of entitlement; interpersonally exploitive behavior; an inability to empathize with the needs and feelings of other people; and envy (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Mooney, p. 885). We all encounter people in our everyday existences that exhibit at least some of these behaviors. Thus, the difference between normal narcissism and NPD is largely one of degree (Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a behavior disorder that can be diagnosed in childhood and adolescence using the same diagnostic criteria as for adults. However, there are additional characteristics specific to children, specifically quality of friendships, quality of performance in school, gaze aversion, pathologic play, and separation anxiety (Kernberg, 1989). Research has proven that narcissistic tendencies can cause multiple problems, which can greatly impact a persons work habits, relationships, and self-esteem.

The most common instrument used for diagnosing NPD is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) which was developed to measure the characteristics of NPD

in the normal population (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). This battery of questions is divided into seven categories: authority, exhibitionism, superiority, entitlement, exploitiveness, self-sufficiency, and vanity. Although research has not been able to prove that a high or low score on the vanity or superiority portions of this questionnaire have any impact on one's future, individuals who score high on the authority and self-sufficiency sub tests exhibit narcissistic behaviors that will most likely not have a negative impact on their life. Participants who, conversely, scored high on the subtests titled exhibitionism, exploitiveness, and entitlement exhibit behaviors that are very likely to interrupt one's job or relationships (Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

### *The Good*

Although NPD is more commonly viewed as a destructive mental disorder, narcissistic traits can produce some behaviors that can positively affect one's life. Sedikides and colleagues (2004) found that (a) narcissism was associated with low levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness and with high levels of well-being and (b) these relations between narcissism and psychological health were completely mediated by trait self-esteem (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004, p.403). According to the NPI self-sufficiency and authority subtests, positive behaviors of narcissism are generally correlated with positive psychological and social attributes such as assertiveness, independence, and self confidence, as well as a healthier self esteem (Barry, 2003). These attributes can take an individual a long way in a society that demands assertiveness and self esteem to be successful.

### *The Bad*

Unfortunately, research has shown that most narcissistic tendencies affect an individual negatively (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). The NPI subtests; entitlement, exhibitionism and exploitiveness characterize the more negative traits of narcissism. Some of these behaviors include believing and acting like they are better than others, expecting everyone to admire them and go along with what they want, and the inability to empathize with others (Horton et al., 2006). These behaviors can vary in severity; although they frequently result in negative consequences. Relationships are often one of the first aspects of a narcissist's life to suffer. A primary reason these relationships suffer is that people with narcissism often enter into relationships based on what other people can do for them (Kagan, 1998). According to research, narcissists report lower levels of empathy, intimacy, caring, commitment, and selflessness (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002).

Moreover, the friendships of a person with NPD are often short term and lack the depth needed to develop a satisfying, symbiotic relationship. They commonly see others simply as objects to be used. They are unable to be empathetic towards someone and at times are even ruthless, sadistic, or destructive to another person (Lowen, 1985). A person with NPD will surround themselves with people who will mirror them, as they want to see themselves. If a friendship begins to get in the way of the image the narcissist has created for them self it will quickly end. When it comes to romantic relationships, people with NPD are tend to enjoy a more game like pattern of love. In addition, they value outwardly attractive partners more than those who offer a true intimate relationship. In fact, a narcissist will view intimacy with anyone as a threat (Horton et al., 2006).

A person with NPD will feed off those around him who will reflect the image he has worked so hard to create and sustain. An individual who is observed by a mental health professional exhibiting these narcissistic traits may need a great deal of psychotherapy and possibly medications, such as an antidepressant or anti-anxiety prescription, to extinguish these behaviors. In many situations, it is difficult, if not impossible, for a therapist to establish a meaningful rapport with a narcissist patient. Once a person with NPD feels his image is being threatened he will remove himself from the situation (Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

### *The Ugly*

There is a growing body of research supporting the view that narcissism is linked to increased violence and aggression (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Twenge & Campbell, 2003, p. 262). Violence is often used as a means to gain respect and retaliate against a person or group that has caused insult or harm. The traditional view that low self-esteem alone causes aggression has not been validated, but more current research has shown that the aggression ensues when these favorable opinions of themselves are disputed or questioned by other people (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; McCullough et al., 2003; Washburn et al, 2004). It therefore seems plausible that aggression results from threatened egotism (Baumeister et al., p. 27). Washburn et al. found that young adolescents with narcissistic features may react angrily and aggressively in situations that threaten their grandiose self-image. Thus, narcissism has taken center stage as the form of self-regard most closely associated with violence.

### *Summary*

It is evident that a person with some narcissistic traits does not dictate a pattern of violence. Although the line between narcissism and NPD is one of degree, we cannot ignore the role that these behaviors may be playing in the increasing incidents of school violence. Furthermore, Twenge and Campbell (2003) speculate that narcissists' aggression against "innocent" others is in part a result of the narcissist perceiving these individuals as part of a rejecting group. This is apparently what occurred in many of the school shootings, when the person who felt rejected by their peers chose to retaliate against everyone in their school, even those they had not interacted with (p. 270).

So, can schools do anything to change the culture as an ever increasing narcissistic climate? Twenge & Campbell (2003) suggests focusing on trying to lower narcissism in schools instead of raising self-esteem. Implementing programs that increase empathy and perspective taking, reward striving and mastery instead of dominance, and promote character over popularity may be the beginnings of positive change.

Obviously, research in this area is largely untapped and has to continue focusing on the relationship between self-esteem, aggression, and narcissistic behaviors. Additionally, research has to explore some essential questions. How does a person's rage over being criticized transform into aggressive outbursts, and how can that rage be redirected in a manner that leads to constructive outcomes? As this area of research expands, it is imperative that the findings be relayed to the educators who spend a large majority of their time with these adolescents.

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