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FAMILY

What Collective Narcissism Does to Society

In everyday settings, it can keep people from listening to one another. At its worst, it might fuel violence.

By Scott Barry Kaufman



Caravaggio / The Atlantic

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In 2005, the psychologist Agnieszka Golec de Zavala was researching extremist groups, trying to understand what leads people to commit acts of terrorist violence. She began to notice something that looked a lot like what the 20th-century scholars Theodor Adorno and Erich Fromm had referred to as “group narcissism”: Golec de Zavala defined it to me as “a belief that the exaggerated greatness of one’s group is not sufficiently recognized by others,” in which that thirst for recognition is never satiated. At first, she thought it was a fringe phenomenon, but important nonetheless. She developed the Collective Narcissism Scale to measure the severity of group-narcissistic beliefs, including statements such as “My group deserves special treatment” and “I insist upon my group getting the respect that is due to it” with which respondents rate their agreement.

Sixteen years later, Golec de Zavala is a professor at SWPS University, in Poland, and a lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, leading the study of group narcissism—and she’s realized that there’s nothing fringe about it. This thinking can happen in seemingly any kind of assemblage: a religious, political, gender, racial, or ethnic group, but also a sports team, club, or cult. Now, she said, she’s terrified at how widely she’s finding it manifested across the globe.

Collective narcissism is not simply tribalism. Humans are inherently tribal, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Having a healthy social identity can have an immensely positive impact on well-being. Collective narcissists, though, are often more focused on out-group prejudice than in-group loyalty. In its most extreme form, group narcissism can fuel political radicalism and potentially even violence. But in everyday settings, too, it can keep groups from listening to one another, and lead them to reduce people on the “other side” to one-dimensional characters. The best way to avoid that is by teaching people how to be proud of their group—without obsessing over recognition.

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Groups may differ in their narrative about why they are superior—they might believe that they’re the most moral, the most culturally sophisticated, the most talented, the most powerful, or the most protective of democratic values. They may think that their greatness is God’s will, or that they’ve earned it through exceptional suffering in the past. Regardless, collective narcissists are resentful of other groups, and hypersensitive to perceived intergroup threat. As a result, collective narcissism often breeds prejudice. In one study, for instance, participants in Poland who rated high in collective narcissism were more likely to hold anti-Semitic beliefs. In other research conducted on Americans, high collective-narcissism scores predicted negative attitudes toward Arab immigrants.

Collective narcissists tend to respond to the perceived threats of other groups in outsize, often aggressive ways. In Portugal, a sample of collective narcissists who perceived Germany as having a more important position than their nation in the European Union “rejoiced in the German economic crisis”—and supported “hostile actions” toward Germans. Meanwhile, group narcissists glorify positively valued in-group members and tend to overlook their moral transgressions. A recent study conducted in Poland, Britain, and the United States found that those high in collective narcissism were more likely to judge a group member’s action—such as a verbal altercation provoked by a pub customer—as moral if it served in-group interests.

But group members don’t always benefit from this thinking: Collective narcissists are hypervigilant about “enemies within,” members who, in their opinion, reflect negatively on the group. And ironically, some studies have suggested that collective narcissists are actually *more*

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likely to leave their group for personal gain, and to use in-group members as tools to advance their own goals.

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When people think of narcissism, they typically conjure up the chest-thumping, boastful, grandiose narcissist. But psychologists, myself included, have identified a more vulnerable form of narcissism, involving a fragile, uncertain

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sense of self-worth, deeply steeped in shame and distrust, along with the typical antagonism and self-entitlement. In some countries, including the U.S., collective narcissism is more strongly correlated with grandiose narcissism—but overall, those scoring high in vulnerable narcissism are actually more likely to fall into collective-narcissistic thinking. Collective narcissists might be obsessed with receiving group recognition because, on a personal level, they feel deeply insecure about their own value and they desperately need validation. They might also be lacking in emotional resilience: Collective narcissism is associated with sensitivity to negative environmental stimuli and negative emotions, which could override prosocial instincts—especially toward out-group members.

Ultimately, though, collective narcissism isn't a successful coping strategy; studies show that it doesn't improve self-esteem. In fact, having collective-narcissistic beliefs probably *increases* one's level of individual vulnerable narcissism: People who believe that their group's greatness is not appreciated seem likely to start worrying that their own personal greatness is not appreciated. Indeed, preliminary data suggest that this is the case. In an experimental study, a situational increase in collective narcissism, stimulated by researchers, resulted in an increase in vulnerable narcissism. This speaks to the very human potential for group narcissism. We're all susceptible to it, especially when narcissistic beliefs become more widespread and normalized within our own groups.

Nowhere do we see this possibility more clearly than in the political arena. Fromm, who wrote about the rise of group narcissism in the aftermath of World War I, said that "group narcissism is a phenomenon of the greatest political significance ... He is nothing—but if he can identify with his nation, or can transfer his personal narcissism to the nation, then he is everything." To be clear, patriotism is not necessarily group narcissism. It's entirely possible to have healthy pride for your nation or political group and the unique aspects of your culture without being consumed by the desire to tear down other groups and by the need for your group to be seen as superior.

Collective narcissism can be found anywhere on the political spectrum, left or right, but it seems to be particularly alluring to populists. National group narcissism has been linked to support for populist parties and politicians around the world. One study found that collective narcissism was the second-strongest predictor (after partisanship) of voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It was also associated with support for Trump's followers attacking the Capitol, and

support for Trump staying in power using undemocratic means. (A longitudinal analysis even found that group narcissism uniquely predicted growth of conspiracy thinking over the course of the 2016 presidential campaign.) Group narcissism was also found to be linked to pro-Brexit voting in the United Kingdom, anti-environmentalism in Poland, and negative attitudes toward the EU in Hungary.

But in smaller groups and lower-stakes settings, collective narcissism is still an ugly problem. One study showed that sports fans high in collective narcissism were more likely to feel threatened by a news report about their team that they perceived as critical—and were more likely to say they'd like to hurt the author of the report or “teach him a lesson.” In another study, students with higher collective-narcissism scores were more likely to respond to negative comments about their university with retaliatory aggression—by denying a hypothetical research grant to a member of an offending out-group when they had the opportunity to act as student evaluators.

How, then, can we curtail the spread of group narcissism and promote more intergroup harmony? The good news is that, just as it's possible to have healthy individual self-esteem, it is possible to have healthy in-group love—where being a member of your group feels good and you have great pride in its genuine accomplishments, but you're not so preoccupied with recognition of the group's superiority. That positive in-group satisfaction is linked to increased well-being: Unlike collective narcissism, it's been associated with greater levels of life satisfaction, positive emotionality, social connectedness, and gratitude.

To be sure, the nature of people's feelings about their groups is not all up to the individual: According to Golec de Zavala, group narcissism may be more likely to spread in environments where there is great uncertainty about personal significance—which she'd expect to be fueled by extreme economic deprivation or marked social inequalities—and under leaders who spread the sense that a group is unfairly treated. But because some narcissistic personality characteristics predict interest in group-narcissistic ideas across a variety of settings, it's worth focusing on personality change—which, though not easy, is possible. People can cultivate self-transcendent emotions—a type of prosocial emotion that links people to something greater than themselves—such as gratitude, awe, or compassion.

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In one preliminary study, Golec de Zavala and her colleagues at the PrejudiceLab found that after participating in a six-week mindful-gratitude training, designed to fortify the ability to regulate negative emotions and cultivate a sense of gratefulness, collective narcissists were less likely to demonstrate sexism, homophobia, and prejudice toward immigrants. As I've written recently, existential gratitude is a resource we can all draw on to help regulate our negative emotions and find meaning in our traumas. In another preliminary study from the PrejudiceLab, Martyna Komorowska, a grad student at the time of the study, found that participants who watched a touching video meant to induce kama muta—the sudden feeling of oneness with others—were less likely to show prejudice toward Syrian refugees, compared with those who watched a control video.

It's not clear how long all of these effects last, but these studies at least provide hints that group narcissism is not inevitable. Group-narcissistic beliefs can form early in life, but they need not develop. Children can be taught that their social identity doesn't need to be externally validated to bring them meaning. They can feel inherently worthy without needing to feel *superior*. And that will benefit others, too: Those with healthy self-esteem are often motivated to use their personal strengths to benefit their in-group. They're not too preoccupied with taking down others.

You can't force everyone to see the value in your group, just as you can't force everyone to see the value in you as an individual. But you *can* control how you see yourself, and the narrative you tell yourself about your group and the world. The only way out from the group-narcissism trap is up, by transcending your group's feelings of entitlement and connecting with fellow humans—even when it's easier to believe that you're special.
