

Individual differences in narcissistic behavior between Generation Me and their parents

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Abstract: - One of the prevailing characteristics of new generations, especially Gen Me, has been the increase in self esteem and in narcissistic traits in their personality. The focus, compared to previous generations, has been transferred from others to the self. The attitudes and the skills of new generations have been affected, as a result. This study explores the differences, regarding the narcissistic behavior between university students of today and their parents, in Greece. The findings suggest significant differences in narcissism between different age groups.

Key-Words: - Narcissism, Generation Me, self esteem, parenting style, NPI, age, gender.

1 Introduction

Narcissism has its origins to Greek mythology where Narcissus, a handsome young man rejected the admiration of nymph Echo (she was cursed to only echo the sounds that others made) and he kept looking for “the best” romantic partner. Nemesis, the goddess of revenge decided to punish him. She led Narcissus to a pool where he saw his own reflection in the water and fell in love with it, not realizing it was merely an image. Narcissus died when he discovered that the object of his love cannot love him back.

Narcissus was grandiose, arrogant and defended his self image of perfection; Echo was interested in others only as a means of regulating her fragile self esteem. Narcissus and Echo are two personality types, completely different but at the same time, they are two sides of the same coin: the failure to love oneself leading through one path or another to the inability to love others.

2 The construct of Narcissism

Narcissism is a dynamic, socially defined construct with two key elements: a positive inflated and agentic view of the self and a self regulatory strategy to maintain and enhance this positive self view [1]. Narcissists believe that they are special and unique [2] and they seek to draw attention to their self [3] and they are fantasizing about fame [4]. They think they are more attractive and more intelligent than they actually are and that they are

entitled to more positive outcomes in life than others [5]. They associate with high-status others in order to gain self esteem [6]. Their self-esteem is fragile although they have inflated self views. They compete with others and dominate them to succeed at their own ends, they claim responsibility for any success and they blame others for any failures. They are better on agentic traits (dominance, power, importance, physical attractiveness) but not at communal traits (caring, morality) [7], [8].

Narcissists are also linked to a number of positive emotional outcomes such as: positive affect, extraversion and short-term life satisfaction [9], [10]. They have enhanced performance on public evaluation missions, they show victories on competitive tasks, they take risks and they are overconfident. These benefits to the individual are primarily affective and evident in the short term. The costs to the narcissistic self occurs from addiction disorders narcissists usually have, such as alcohol abuse [11], pathological gambling [12] and compulsory shopping [13].

Except from the consequences to the individual, Narcissistic behavior bears costs to people around the narcissist. Narcissists avoid relationships with intimacy, commitment, selflessness and caring and they get involved in troubled romantic relationships [14]. They show low levels of empathy for others and their relationships are based to exploitation and domination of others. When they fail to win, they react badly and behave with aggression [15]. They tend to be spurred less by intrinsic motives and

more by extrinsic desires [16], [17]. Finally, over time narcissists become disliked by others [18], [19].

2.1 The role of parenting in formation of Narcissism

According to Freud [29] narcissism involves self love, self-admiration, self-aggrandizement and incorporates vulnerabilities concerning self-esteem and fear of failure. Narcissism with self-esteem is relatively healthy; narcissism without self esteem is not [30]. Jean Twenge examined the shifts of self esteem along different generations. She found that the average college man in mid 1990's had higher self esteem than the average college man in 1968 by 86% (for woman it was 71%). She concluded that Baby Boomers' generation (those born 1946-1964) was brought up with values of duty and honor, politeness and social approval, where "others" were more important than the self. In 60's, Baby Boomers questioned authorities and wanted to change the world. Social consciousness was increased and emphasis was given to personal growth. The parenting style of Baby Boomers encouraged their children (Generation Me, 1981-2002) to be themselves, since "they were the most important people in the world". That increased the self esteem of the whole generation affecting their personalities, their attitudes and their skills. Twenge [31] argues that a negative outcome of the overemphasis on self esteem has been the increase in narcissism, where individuals are "overly focused on themselves and lack empathy for others."

Many researchers have explored the causes of narcissism. Kohut shed some light on the development of the narcissistic self. According to Kohut [23], a child's self, develops along two primary dimensions: grandiose exhibitionism and idealization. At early childhood all individuals possess the need to be mirrored (usually by the mother) and the need to idealize (usually the father). Narcissism develops when parents fail to meet one or both of these needs. Narcissism is also evoked when parents are overindulgent and over permissive. That parenting style leads to narcissism, as the child is taught that he/she is superior and entitled to special treatment regardless of the effort, the performance, or the behavior he/she exhibits.

According to Rothstein [24], narcissism develops when parents regard the child as a means to satisfy their own selfish motives. This parenting style uses the child so as for the parents to fulfill their unsatisfied needs for admiration, praise, recognition and achievement [26]. Then the child continuously

searches for approval from the parents or important others, as he/she never developed his own standards of success.

The etiology of narcissism according to Kernberg [27] stems from cold unempathetic parenting (particularly mother), that leads the child to be unloved. The combination of coldness, high expectations and demands from the child lead it to the narcissistic self. The excessive demanding, without being responsive to the child's legitimate needs, leaves the child feeling incompetent, either because the child is not allowed to develop its own skills, or because without assistance and guidance the child is left vulnerable to accidents and traumas [28]. Parenting styles that do not provide responsiveness and support for the child's development, cognitive and physical, create the sense of inadequacy to the child and a model of the self that he/she is not worth any support [45].

2.1.1 Age, Gender and Narcissism

Research on narcissism has resulted in gender differences on narcissistic behavior. Specifically, men usually report greater levels of narcissism than women [32], [33]. Women are characterized as "nurturing" and more influenced by social factors and environmental constraints [34], [35]. They are seeking intimacy, support and consensus. They prefer interpersonal aspects and are good at providing services [36]. Foster et al., [17] argues that as clinical disorders may become less evident by ageing, narcissism traits also seem to deflate. The inflated views one has lessen by ageing, as the opportunities for failure increase. The age differences in narcissism may also be due to birth cohort [31]. The more individualistic an environment is, the higher narcissism is indicated. Younger people grew up in cultures based on the "individual", might display increased narcissism comparing to the eras where older people were raised in collectivistic environments. Therefore, based on the above, we propose that:

H 1: There is a negative correlation between age and narcissism.

H 2: Males are more narcissistic than females.

3 Methodology

The study analyzed data from 1449 participants, students at the department of Business Administration of Technological Institution of Athens and their parents. 47.8% of the participants were male and the 52.2% were female. Students accounted for 27.4% of the total population. 48.4%

of the participants are up to 29 years old, 32% are between 30 and 49, and 19.5 % are 50 and over. The scale used to measure narcissism is one for non-clinical populations the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) [43], [46]. NPI is considered a reliable, well validated and widely used construct. The scale exhibits satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha=0.91$). Seven factors were identified in the original scale: Authority, Self-sufficiency, Superiority, Entitlement, Exhibitionism, Exploitativeness, and Vanity. Later, Emmons [2] identified only four dimensions (Leadership/ Authority, Superiority/ Arrogance, Self-absorption/ Self-admiration, Exploitativeness/ Entitlement). The scale of NPI is a construct “protected” from social desirability influences through its use of forced-choice dyads and so it is not correlated with measures of social desirability [44]. For each of the 40 dyad questions participants choose either the narcissistic response or the non-narcissistic response. The scores of the 40 items are summed together. The highest scores indicate higher levels of narcissism.

The research took place during the first semester of 2012. Students and their parents voluntarily participated in the research. The questionnaire was available on an internet platform where students have access and they filled and submitted it online. Data validation corrected the wrong entries and then followed the hypothesis testing and model analysis. Raw data were encoded, imported and analyzed using the Microsoft Office Excel and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 18.0 (SPSS).

4 Results and Discussion

Are males more narcissistic than females? Participants in the present study reported a mean NPI score of 16.66 (SD=8.95). Males and females reported different scores of narcissism (males' NPI: $M=17.50$, $SD=9.32$; females' NPI: $M=15.89$, $SD=8.52$). We hypothesized that males are more narcissistic than females. We initially examined gender differences by performing regression analysis in gender and NPI scores. The results revealed a weak, nevertheless significant, negative correlation between gender NPI scores $r=-0.09$, $p<.001$ revealing that men indicate slightly higher narcissistic behavior than women participants. Specifically, only 7% (adjusted R^2) of the total NPI behavior is explained by gender differences (St. Error =8.9).

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed with the 1449 questionnaire responses to identify the factors affecting the Narcissistic

behavior of students comparing to that of their parents. The extraction method was Principal Component Analysis [40] and the Varimax method was applied to increase the explanatory ability of the model. Effects are grouped in four factors (Leadership/ Authority, Superiority/ Arrogance, Self-absorption/ Self-admiration, Exploitativeness/ Entitlement), whose eigenvalues exceeded 1. The selected factors accounted for the 58.55% of the total variance.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.807 indicating the appropriateness of using the technique for factor analysis. This appropriateness was further supported by the significant result from Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 3431.55$; $p<0.0001$). Cronbach's α coefficients were: Leadership/ Authority: $\alpha = 0.665$; Superiority/ Arrogance: $\alpha=0.747$; Self-absorption/ Self-admiration: $\alpha=0.717$, Exploitativeness/ Entitlement: $\alpha=0.674$. The impact of personal characteristics upon the four factors influencing the narcissistic behavior is examined, by using inferential statistics (t-tests and ANOVA tests). According to these tests:

The hypothesis “Males are considered to have higher narcissistic scores of Self-absorption/ Self-admiration comparing to females” ($t=1998$, $df=1447$ & $p=0.046<0.05$) is supported. The hypothesis “Males are considered to have higher narcissistic scores of Leadership/ Authority compared to females” ($t=5149$, $df=1429$ & $p=0.00<0.05$) is supported. “Males are considered to have higher narcissistic scores of Superiority/ Arrogance comparing to females” ($t=-5176$, $df=1439$ & $p=0.00<0.05$) the hypothesis is supported. The hypothesis “Males are considered to have higher narcissistic scores of Exploitativeness/ Entitlement comparing to females” ($t=558$, $df=1438$ & $p=0.557>0.05$) is not supported. Age is considered to be negatively correlated to narcissism; young students are more narcissistic than older people, their parents. Narcissism is examined as scores on Leadership/ Authority, Superiority/ Arrogance, Self-absorption/ Self-admiration, Exploitativeness/ Entitlement factors.

The hypothesis “Students by the age of 29, are considered to have higher narcissistic scores of Superiority/Arrogance traits compared to their parents” is supported. Equal variances not assumed and $F=33,555$ $df=2$ & $p=0.0<0.001$ indicates differences among the means of groups belonging in different age groups. Specifically, there is a difference between the age group of parents, i.e. over 50 years old (mean=.42037) with the age group 18-29 years old (mean=.13807) and with the age group 30-49 years old (mean=.46481). The group of

elders exhibit lower narcissism than the group of the younger ones.

The hypothesis “Students by the age of 29, are considered to have higher narcissistic scores of Leadership/ Authority comparing to their older parents” is supported. Equal variances assumed and $F=6.691$ $df=1446$ & $p=0.001$ indicate differences among the means of groups belonging in different age groups. Specifically, there are differences between the means of age groups: the group 18-29 years old (mean=.06817) with the age group 30-50 years old (mean=-.14198) and the age group over 50 years old (mean=-.064417) with the age group 30-50 years old (mean=-.14198).

The hypothesis “Students are considered to have higher narcissistic scores of Self-absorption/ Self-admiration and of Exploitativeness/ Entitlement compared to their parents”. Equal variances assumed, $F=2.649$, $df=2$ & $p>0.05$ and respectively $F=2649$, $df=2$ & $p>0.05$, indicates no differences among the means of different age groups.

Cluster analysis [41] was applied to identify the actual groups of the respondents and identify common patterns. Using the K-means method, effects are grouped in two clusters: the cluster of 1. Low narcissism ($N=684$; Mean=10,75; $SD=5,355$ and the cluster of 2. Excess Narcissism ($N=765$; Mean=23,26; $SD=7,405$). ANOVA analysis was further applied between the group of Low narcissism and the group of Excess Narcissism and their demographic characteristics such as age and gender.

The hypothesis that students by the age of 29 belong in excess narcissism group and have higher narcissism than the low narcissism group is supported, since equal variances are not assumed, $F=25717$ $df=1$ $p<0.05$. The hypothesis that males belong in excess narcissism group and have higher narcissism than the low narcissism group is not supported (equal variances are assumed, $F=0,523$ $df=1447$ $p>0.05$).

Based on the above, students have higher scores in narcissism compared to their parents. The gender of the participants was not a clear indicator of their narcissism.

The purpose of the study was to examine the relation between the NPI of students compared to the NPI of their parents. Overall, the findings support the construct validity of the NPI as a measure of narcissism in non clinical populations.

The findings suggest that age is negatively correlated to narcissism. Student’s narcissism exceeds the narcissism of their parents. The large cultural changes in parenting behavior, in education styles, in family life and in the adoption of

technologies of information and communication have created personalities focused on their self. Probably the cultural influences that have increased self esteem have also increased narcissism. Our results concluded that participants older than 50 years old have significant differences in narcissistic traits as Superiority/ Arrogance and Leadership/ Authority, with younger participants, below 29 years old and between 30 and 49 years old. Given that narcissism decreases with age, a 30 year old man has similar level of narcissism to a 20 year old woman [43]. Bartram [42] found similar age differences between Gen Xs and Gen Me (or Gen Ys) and the Baby Boomers (their parents) measuring their achievement focus. This difference may reflect developmental changes in narcissism with age, generational shifts, or both [39].

We also conclude that generally, males are no more narcissists than females. We found that men are more narcissists than women for some aspects of narcissism, such as Leadership/ Authority, Superiority/ Arrogance, Self-absorption/ Self-admiration. The emergence of Leadership trait on men narcissists is more evident than in women. Women in leadership positions attract negative sanctions because they would violate stereotypical gender role expectancies for women. For the traits of Exploitativeness/ Entitlement both men and women express the similar levels of narcissism. In disagreement to our findings, Tschanz et al., [44] concluded that exploitativeness/ entitlement would be less well integrated with the other components of narcissism for females than for males; due to the social role they have which forces them to be caring, compassionate, warm, sensitive and understanding. Twenge [32] links the rise in narcissism with the growing sense of Entitlement among Gen Me, where students are demanding better grades, irrespective of the effort they have put in. Entitlement is associated with ambitiousness, need for power, dominance, hostility, toughness and lack of self control. Exploitetiveness is associated with characteristics as rebelliousness, nonconformity, hostility and lack of empathy for others [26]. These are characteristics very common in Gen Me.

5 Conclusion

Gen Me presents increased narcissistic characteristics, increased self esteem and an inflated view of itself. Students have high and rather unrealistic expectations of educational attainment and success. They overvalue appearance, power, importance, and physical attractiveness. The narcissist trait of students and their parents

examined in this study, demonstrated the differences between the different age groups. Aging reduces the traits of narcissism, since the opportunities for failure are rising with it. The overconfidence of students declines with the years and the unrealistic expectations dissipate. Finally, the gender differences in narcissism reveal the different aspects the two genders conceptualize and evaluate, in different situations.

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