

# A rise in narcissism could be one of the main causes of America's political and economic crises

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*An increase in narcissistic personality traits has been monitored in the United States in past decades. But, the ties between America's current crises and this phenomena may not have been debated enough. [Dennis Shen](#) tracks narcissism's rise, the potential link to economic conditions and discusses consequences. Moreover, he notes the striking phenomena now comparably evolving in China and abroad.*



In 2009, Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell published “[The Narcissism Epidemic](#)”, a haunting diagnostic detailing a gradual, but seismic shift in the nation's cultural norm towards self-admiration. Though certainly not all the consequences of heightened self-esteem are negative, this cultural phenomenon was described as destructive to American society at an extreme: damaging the reciprocity that binds families and communities, and encouraging divisive and antisocial, short-term behaviors over long-term, collective decision-making.

Since the book's publication, further research has supported the referenced increase in feelings of self-worth, with [one nationwide data set](#) showing twice as many American college students answering the majority of questions in a narcissistic direction in 2009 compared with in 1982. This was based on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) test, the most widely used metric on the subject in social psychology. Similar conclusions were shown in research that [59% of American college freshmen](#) rated themselves above average in intellectual self-confidence in 2014, compared with 39% in 1966. And, generational increase in symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) was pointed to in [earlier research](#) from the National Institutes of Health.

At extremes, narcissism undermines institutions that underpin a strong society, with links to shallow values, less intellectual interest and value on hard work, aggression and relationship complications, and lack of empathy and concern for others. When we consider political or economic dilemmas, we should not avoid discussion of the role that cultural factors and social psychology might have.

## A multi-generational change

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a rare consensus within America emerged, the result of existential crises in the form of the World War and looming Cold War. In an era when the United States' hegemony was unchallenged in the West, a type of groupthink existed within the nation's borders—the ‘Greatest Generation’ emphasized conformity and discouraged individuality. This was supported by earlier shared struggles and the decline of class differences during the Great Depression and war era. This post-war era of togetherness saw unprecedented economic stability and trust in the state as the steward of the people. The nation backed global reciprocity, exemplified during the founding of the United Nations, Bretton Woods institutions and Marshall Plan.

Authors Twenge and Campbell trace the earliest roots in narcissism back to the 1950s. The Baby Boomers were the first generation to grow up in a post-war era of greater consumer plenitude and less existential hardship. As the Baby Boomers came of age in the 1960s and 70s, the grey society of the post-war consensus had begun to vanish in favor of a more individualistic focus on self-expression and self-identity.

The problem is that this change in the narrative furthered henceforth. It became pronounced enough by the 1970s that Tom Wolfe in 1976 titled this “[The ‘Me’ Decade](#)”. The cohorts that were raised in the 70s and 80s—Generations X and Y—continued this trend: to the extent that one study comparing teenagers found that while only 12% of those aged 14-16 in the early 1950s agreed with the statement “*I am an important person*”, 77% of boys and more than

80% of girls of the same cohort by 1989 agreed with it. This evolution has accelerated since the 1990s and 2000s, with the rise of the internet and social media influencing the social milieu of the Millennials and Generation Z.

### **Cultural roots of the modern crisis**

Many of the extant crises in the United States can be traced to some extent to such cultural factors and entitled behavior. The racial and ideological tensions, and consequential partisanship in Washington—which supported the election of Donald J. Trump, have been exacerbated by the self-focused and competitive behavior of separate interest groups in society and politics, with not enough of the requisite empathy to reassess the world from one another's vantage points. The financial crisis can be explained in part by the narcissistic behaviors of bankers and consumers alike—creating a “time-delay trap” of near-term greed over long-term logic. America's trade deficit has been exacerbated by debt-financed “conspicuous consumption”—goods purchased to elevate one's status in front of others, rather than out of necessity. And the crisis of confidence in government can be ascribed in part to the philosophical “hunkering down” and focus on self-sufficiency, rather than on mutual dependence.

### **Solutions to the dilemma?**

It's critical to recall that across time there's no single cultural norm for a nation, but rather that the behaviors and customs of a society evolve and change drastically as the experiences and personalities of that nation alter. There are significant contrasts between the America of today and that of the immediate post-war era—whether we recall this or not. In this, not only will the America of tomorrow look different as future generations come, but we ourselves will continue to readapt and change.

Methods to address narcissism are not simple, however, even if society is malleable. During times of economic growth and stability, narcissism tends to grow. This is due to how success and prosperity impacts people, how that then filters to more accommodating parenting norms, and how we're affected by urbanization and changes to smaller family sizes. Conversely, economic hardship and economic down-cycles tend to support group-minded, non-self-centered people, by enforcing modesty and hard work. In that, there may be both an inherent cyclical dynamic between business cycles and narcissism, and a structural dynamic between economic development and narcissism—with too much societal hubris only correctable in the end through a form of economic or national crisis.

### **A crisis around the world**

The issue has not been isolated to the United States. Rather, the evolution of narcissism has advanced around corners of the world.

In China, there's been an economic revolution experienced within the span of half a lifetime—with hundreds of millions lifted out of poverty since 1980 and living standards transformed and modernized. But, with the economic miracle has come the sudden upheaval in former collectivistic norms. The rise of the ‘Little Emperors’ and ‘[Precious Snowflakes](#)’ is now evident in younger generations that have grown up in only-child households amongst growing economic abundance. Research notes the [role of sociodemographic factors](#) in this increase in narcissism. In the decades ahead, societal, political and economic dilemmas could manifest, if such trends in China advance absent pushback.

### **Looking ahead**

A recognition of the problematic associations with narcissism is critical to solving domestic and international issues impacted by it. In addition, greater attention needs to be placed in policy circles on how economic and political development can be furthered whilst preserving or inducing characteristics of a cohesive, self-critical community.

[Group selfie of the United States Women's National Soccer Team with Barack Obama](#) by [ObamaWhite House](#) is licensed under [US Government Work](#).

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## **About the author**

### **Dennis Shen**

Dennis Shen graduated from the MPA in International Development from the London School of Economics in 2013, and completed undergraduate studies at Cornell University. He worked with Alliance Bernstein in New York and London, most recently in the role of European Economist. His research interests include international political economy, global governance and environmental regulation.



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