Narcissistic Night Sweats

Read More: American Idol, Baby Einstein, George Clooney, Obama, The Narcissism Epidemic, Wonder Bread, X-Box, Media News


As Americans fight off the swine flu, social researchers Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell have taken aim at a different kind of bug. In their new book, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, they argue that "the relentless rise in narcissism" in one way or another "has touched every American."
The authors begin by identifying five root causes of the epidemic: "self-admiration; child centered parenting; celebrity glorification and media encouragement; attention seeking on the internet; and easy credit." The symptoms are vanity, materialism, uniqueness, anti-social behavior, relationship troubles, entitlement and (oddlly) religion and volunteering, and The Narcissism Epidemic concludes with a discussion of the prognosis and suggested treatment.

Like its poster child for the cultural crisis, Paris Hilton, the book's body is appealing but thin. Identified thirty years ago by the historian Christopher Lasch, the culture of narcissism is by all accounts a problem in modern America. But narcissism is an imprecise concept. Twenge and Campbell deserve credit for citing the best available empirical studies measuring the phenomenon, but the science is squishy and the analysis which flows from it is more than a bit shaky.

Twenge and Campbell see narcissism under every rock, from cheating on tests to cheating on spouses. Sometimes they're flat out wrong. They claim, for example, that narcissism is "the missing ingredient" responsible for the housing bubble. They don't realize that millions of Americans these days are petrified of debt. Nor are today's borrowers in any sense unique in reaching for the main chance. Even in the pre-credit card age of the Conestoga wagon, inner-directed rock-ribbed Republicans from Indiana would have grabbed a subprime loan to buy a home for their families. Although they might have been willing to stretch beyond their means --"on the come," so to speak - no one would have or should have adjudged them narcissists.

All too often, moreover, The Narcissism Epidemic seems like a self-help manual, long on harangues about MySpace and YouTube - and bromides. Don't be narcissistic, the authors keep saying. Teach your kids not to be narcissistic. Don't get married to or make friends with narcissists. There are a few fine suggestions: don't give your kid an X-Box, Twenge and Campbell advise parents; design something yourself, like a poem written in crayon on construction paper. Far more often, however, they simplify a complex problem. For example, they think giving trophies to every kid in Little League at the end of the season sows the seeds of narcissism. Are they right? It seems to us that triumphant trophies for tots don't always send the same message as do meritorious medals for mid-teens. Self-esteem doesn't always lead to narcissism.

The authors sometimes have a thesis in search of corroborating evidence. They acknowledge that voluntarism is up among America's youth, but try to explain it away as a self-centered exercise in resume building, an argument that rings hollow - and maybe offensive, even for the affluent, whiter than Wonder Bread suburban youngsters who seem to be the "real" subjects and targets of the book. Equally empty are apocalyptic warnings about the nation going to hell in a handbag (designed, we assume, by Gucci) because of American Idol, tummy tucks, MILFS and Baby Einstein videos.

The limitations of the analysis are especially evident when one listens to the dogs that don't bark in this book, including the pervasiveness of fundamentalist religion in the United States and the fact that Americans work harder than their counterparts in other industrialized countries. Are these folks immune to the epidemic? Are they exceptions that somehow prove the rule? And, if you say, as the authors do, be less like Paris Hilton and more like George Clooney, aren't you endorsing the celebrity culture you've just indicted?

As Twenge and Campbell note, there are nervous-making developments in American culture on many fronts: vacuous "reality television" shows, declines in reading rates among young adults, and so forth. But, we believe that a transformation in American attitudes and behavior will not come from exhortation and hortatory comments, but from systemic change.

Plotted down in the middle of the Obama recalibration of the economy, society, and culture of the United States, Twenge and Campbell's narcissism narrative seems, well, so five minutes ago. Is it possible, we wonder, that the book is appearing at the very moment the epidemic has peaked? Or is such optimism the product of our fevered imaginations?