Published in 1978, "The Culture of Narcissism" became the signature critique of "The Me Decade." In the book, cultural historian Christopher Lasch claimed that a personality type consistent with clinical definitions of pathological narcissism had become the "underlying character structure" of the post-World War II United States.

Brought on by bureaucratization, therapeutic and New Age ideologies, the erosion of asceticism, restraint, self-possession and other traditional values, the culture of consumption, changes in family structures and functions, and affluence and abundance, the new narcissism was characterized by emotional shallowness, low self-esteem, envy and rage. Along with other critics, most notably Daniel Bell (in "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism"), Lasch warned that the new narcissism might well result in the unravelling of American society.

Ironically, according to Elizabeth Lunbeck, a professor of history at Vanderbilt University, at the very moment these Cassandras were prophesying decline and doom, psychoanalysts were reconceptualizing narcissism. As essential as love of others, they suggested, self-love could and often did play a constructive role in the attainment of psychological equilibrium, happiness and worldly success.

In "The Americanization of Narcissism," Lunbeck captures the complex and contested history of narcissism, from the introduction of the concept by Freud in 1914, to the examination of "normal narcissism" by psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, to the new "new narcissism" of the 21st century.

And, as she assesses the relationship between narcissism and vanity, homosexuality, gratification, independence and identity, Lunbeck provides an informative and engaging account of the clashes between Freud and his one-time disciples over a clinical concept that would morph into a cultural indictment.

Although psychoanalysts and cultural critics appear to have inhabited parallel universes in the 1970s, Lunbeck demonstrates that public commentators began "wrestling with the virtues of narcissism's vices" in the '80s. Popularizers claimed that a healthy narcissism generated an inviting glow that "makes you attractive, lovable, successful and good in bed." Psychoanalyst and leadership guru Michael Maccoby anointed Steve Jobs a model of "the productive narcissist," who was well-endowed with charisma, creativity and self-confidence. What was wrong, Maccoby asked, with "a realistic concern for
self-preservation?"

Nonetheless, Lunbeck points out, fears of pathological narcissism and its impact on American society remained alive and well in popular culture. Pointing to consumerism, failed marriages and preoccupation with the self on Facebook, pundits bemoaned a 21st-century epidemic of narcissism. Administered to college students from 1980 to the present, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory saw significant increases in the percentage of young men and women who affirmed "I think I am a special person," "I am assertive" and "I am a good leader."

Some observers deemed these responses evidence of a healthy engagement with the social environment. They argued that low self-esteem is the greater problem. Lunbeck agrees. She concludes, hyperbolically, it seems to me, that the Lascheans exhibited "nothing but the narcissism of the theorist" in an "unrealizable fantasy of independence and autonomy" more applicable to themselves than to "the self-absorbed adolescent, the shopaholic woman and the aging Boomer still in search of himself."

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