

## United States of Narcissism

**Self-obsession is on the rise in America, and the economic consequences could be dire.**

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Imagine a person who does what he wants, regardless of how it affects other people. He refuses to take responsibility for his own mistakes, and he believes he's unbeatable at anything he undertakes, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Sounds like a textbook narcissist, right? Well, these days, it also sounds a lot like the United States.

Narcissism is on the rise in the U.S. It's likely to get worse before it gets better, and the economic consequences will likely be severe. Americans today are happy to spend rather than sacrifice, leaving future generations with the bill instead of accepting higher taxes themselves. They choose to keep bathing in a sea of cheap credit rather than cracking down on the practices and institutions that led to the financial crisis. And all along, they insist that their economic system is the best even while neglecting future investments in the very things that make a productive society: education, infrastructure, and scientific research.

So how did this happen? In their book, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell find the origins of self-obsession in the 1960s, when people began to cast off societal constraints and expectations in favor of exploring their own human potential. This movement didn't begin with a purely narcissistic slant, yet by the 1970s it had morphed into self-admiration, self-expression, and self-absorption. In the 1980s those qualities gave way to self-centeredness and self-indulgence, and it was all downhill from there.

Psychologists have been tracking narcissism through surveys of American college students since the late 1970s, and levels of it—often measured as a lack of empathy—have never been higher, according to Sara Konrath, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan's Research Center for Group Dynamics. "If you look at the levers in society, almost all of them are pushing us towards narcissism," she says. These levers go beyond Twitter feeds and Facebook pages, which offer endless opportunities for self-admiration. They also include advertising that tells consumers "You're worth it" and reality-TV shows that turn regular people against each other in a battle for celebrity.

Unfortunately, the notion that any American can become a superhuman success is increasingly a myth. In recent decades Americans have encountered far more inequality and far less social mobility than their parents. But narcissism leads these same Americans to reject redistributive tax systems, since they're sure they will succeed and have little empathy for those who don't. They prefer to receive tax breaks rather than investing in opportunities for future generations (although they may make exceptions for their families, who often fall within their narcissistic spheres of concern).

If social mobility continues to erode, and narcissism increases, the nation will someday face tremendous economic and psychic costs. Crushing debts left by the Me Generation will fall upon a country ill prepared for its economic future. At the same time, Americans will suffer a moment of epic disillusionment as their narcissistic balloons finally burst.