Look at Me! The Rise of Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism under Neo- Liberalism

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Anita Brookner's novel *Look at me* (1982) explores two very different meanings of the title phrase. The first meaning attaches to a glamorous couple, Nick and Alix, who behave much as F. Scott Fitzgerald described in *The Great Gatsby*, "They were careless people…they smashed up things and then retreated to their vast carelessness… and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (2013/1925, p. 218). Charming and self-confident, they are also entitled, exploitative and lacking in empathy. The brilliance of Brookner's novel however, lies in her simultaneous depiction via her main character, Frances, of a second meaning of the phrase. Single, lonely, and yearning for attention, she feels overlooked, on the outside of life and the riches enjoyed by others. Here the tone is pleading, as in "*Please*, look at me!" Yet there is a haughtiness in her as well, a well-hidden sense of superiority as she modestly goes about her business. Frances knows the Great Gatsby crowd are empty but desperately wants their attention. For a time they toy with her; their constant self-display needs the presence of an audience like Frances who reassures them by her very insignificance that "they were richer than I was." Then she no longer interests them and is cast aside with a ruthlessness and cruelty that leaves her gasping with shame. She writes of their greed; "…they simply took what they wanted. That was the law."

Brookner might have been describing the recent work which reveals two kinds of narcissism. The first and obvious meaning of her title, is the commanding shout and swagger of what have been called "grandiose," "overt," "thick-skinned" or "oblivious" narcissists; confident, self-enhancing, self-promoting individuals who pursue the attention and admiration of others, treating them as sources of narcissistic supply to be used and discarded at will. Brookner gets this right, as recent studies show it is not the narcissist, at least in the short term, who suffers, but those around them. The second meaning of Brookner's novel speaks to a very different predicament of self, that of the "covert," "hypersensitive," "thin-skinned" or "vulnerable" narcissist, for whom the meaning of the title phrase is an anxious cry for recognition; the thin, painful wail of an adult desperate to be noticed by the world, someone who feels excluded and passed over, like the small child who begs the disinterested mother, "Please Mummy, *LOOK* at me!"

Brookner's intuition – that there might be two forms of narcissism – is at the centre of recent debates over what constitutes and causes narcissism. Since the psychoanalysts Heinz Kohut (1971) and Otto Kernberg (1975; Kernberg in Morrison, 1986) first wrote their seminal works on narcissism, the psychodynamic consensus has been that grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, exploitativeness and so on, can hide shame, a fragile insecurity and low self-esteem (see Schore, 1994, p. 425). Kernberg, for example, wrote of how the longer someone progressed in analysis, what emerged beneath the swagger was a

hungry, enraged, empty self… such self-images as remain reveal a picture of a worthless, poverty-stricken, empty person who always feels left on the 'outside' devoured by envy of those who have food, happiness, fame (1975, p. 233).

Often described as the "mask theory" of narcissism, this view has recently been sharply challenged by empirically minded academic psychologists, (not clinicians) like Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell in *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement* (2009; see also Campbell & Miller, 2011). Their work is based on an explosion of new research using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) in U.S. college populations. The NPI involves self-assessment via a forced choice between such items as "The thought of ruling the world frightens the hell out of me," versus "If I ruled the world it would be a much better place," and "I am an extraordinary person" versus "I am much like everybody else." Twenge and Campbell's research shows that narcissism has risen by 30 per cent since 1979, with the sharpest rises occurring in the 2000's.

Narcissism, they assert, is not a "mask" for insecurity, but a consistent sense of superiority based on a self-esteem that is too high. Actually, they say, narcissists really *do* admire themselves that much. Narcissists they show, can cause havoc at home and in the workplace. These are socially dominant individuals who have adopted a "get ahead" strategy for life, rather than a "get along" approach. They hog the conversation, directing it back to themselves when it veers away. Competitive, agentic and striving, they are much less oriented to care and nurture. Male narcissists are more likely to cheat sexually and to keep the upper hand by remaining open to other relationships while gaining the benefits of a committed one (Campbell, 2005). While narcissists are braggarts, their actual abilities in reality have been shown to be no better than others. Then there is the aggression; in the laboratory the narcissist is more likely to give a loud blast of noise, or an electric shock, to someone who has criticised them (Reidy, Zeichner, Foster & Martinez, 2008; Thomas, Bushman, Stegge & Olthof, 2008). Studies of the narcissist's implicit as well as explicit self-esteem show, they argue, that "narcissists have similar positive and inflated views of themselves inside and outside" (Twenge & Campbell cited in Manne, 2014, p. 333). Enough of "hurt deep down inside" Twenge and Campbell say. In essence, narcissists are just jerks.

As a cause, they identify spoiling and indulgence by parents; in particular the self-esteem movement since the 1970's which urged parents to treat children like royalty and hand out praise like confetti at a wedding. Children are taught songs of self-love in preschool, while in primary school sports, every child wins a prize. As a consequence children suffer an

absence of the reality principle (2009). Twenge and Campbell acknowledge that they are mainly concerned with subclinical grandiose narcissism, and indeed the NPI has been shown to be biased towards detecting this type.

There is however, another portrait of narcissism, based upon the art, science and craft of psychotherapy, built up over hours upon hours of intimate discussions, which should not be dismissed. It is close to what anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "thick description" (1973, p. 4). Gifted clinicians like Francis Broucek (1991), Michael Lewis (1992), John Fiscalini and Alan Grey (1993), Glen Gabbard (2005), Elsa Ronningstam (2005) and Alexander Lowen (2012) have added to the picture offered by Freud (2014/1914), Kohut (1971) and Kernberg (1975). They acknowledge the obnoxious qualities – narcissists are notoriously difficult to treat – but also give a sense of a more fragile and shamed self. One possibility is that psychotherapists are dealing with the more thin-skinned and vulnerable narcissist, whose defences fail and end up on the psychotherapist's couch, in the winter of their own discontent. Alternatively, therapists may be encountering a more severe pathology, in the form of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). While the most recent volume of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), lists grandiosity, arrogance, entitlement, exploitativeness, envy of others, the desire to be "special" and the centre of attention, and lack of empathy, in the description it also says "their self-esteem is invariably very fragile," capturing how shame, especially *bypassed* (unacknowledged) shame, rather than simply excessive pride, is part of the problem.

Moreover, there are some objections to the empirical evidence Twenge and Campbell cite. Given that more narcissistic people like to project an image of superiority, admitting you feel bad about parts of yourself is tantamount to confessing to weakness. Many narcissists may be protecting fragile self-esteem by engaging in self-enhancing manoeuvres while completing the self-assessment. This is borne out by several studies which probed a little deeper. When primed with words like "shame" and "humiliation", those higher in narcissism are more likely to react with defensive aggression. As Brad Bushman and his colleagues observed, in the study mentioned earlier showing that narcissists react with more aggression than non-narcissists on receiving negative feedback, blasting their 'critics' with an aversively loud noise, it is "only when they are shamed" (2011, p. 323). In another study, Erin Myer and Virgil Zeigler Hill (2012) used a bogus lie detector in their questionnaire examining narcissism and self-esteem. With no threat of a lie detector, narcissists reported higher self- esteem. When confronted with a lie detector, they reported *lower* self-esteem. Jessica Tracy and her colleagues found people higher in narcissism had higher cortisol levels when stressed, suggesting less resilience and greater fragility, whatever the outside demeanour may be (Cheng, Tracy & Miller, 2013). And why precisely, as Twenge and Campbell admit at the end of their book, do narcissistic people improve when taught "self-compassion" techniques?

Moreover, if you are so over confident, why the aggression when humiliated or criticised? That doesn't speak to a secure sense of self or solidly high self-esteem, but a high and unstable pattern, a roller coaster, or what Jessica Tracy and her colleagues caught in the title of an article, "The emotional dynamics of narcissism: Inflated by pride, deflated by

shame" (Tracy, Cheng, Martens & Robins in Campbell & Miller, 2011; see also *Robins, Tracy & Shaver*, 2001). This captures something important, that implicitly embedded in both the "mask" and the "jerk" idea of narcissism is a *static* or nested self. If I may be mischievous for a moment, the "mask" self is conceptualised like an artichoke, ugly spikiness of self-aggrandisement on the outside and a tender kernel of insecurity on the inside. For the "jerk" idea it is just ugliness all the way down! What Tracy captures instead, is that narcissism is a dynamic underlying system of emotional regulation; a "seize the day" orientation to the rewards of pride, while actively repelling the puncturing, deflating negative self-evaluations of shame.

Before continuing, let me distinguish what is desirable and undesirable in self-esteem. What is desirable is not one that claims *superiority* to other selves, but a sturdy sense of self-r*espect* which claims *equality* with other selves, as in "I am as good as the next person." Rosenberg put it thus; "When we deal with self-esteem, we are asking whether an individual considers himself adequate- a person of worth- not whether he considers himself superior to others" (2015/1965, p. 62). Such ego strength or "genuine" self-esteem can help a person reject behaviour by others that is manipulative or exploitative. It also aids a person in responding thoughtfully and with concern to criticism, rather than with defensive rage. It is *high but unstable* self-esteem which has been shown to be problematic in narcissism. In particular, violent oscillations due to *contingent* self-esteem, where the person is excessively dependent on the opinions and valuation of the world around them. This reliance on narcissistic supply means a brittle fragility, with each social encounter being potentially read as a plebiscite on their worth.

Clinicians and empirical psychologists alike agree that narcissists display an *excessive* pride. However, here again a distinction is important. The self-enjoyment, vitality and confidence, part of the desirable qualities in the concept of "healthy" narcissism includes a capacity to feel pleasure in *just* (deserved) or *authentic pride*. This authentic pride is not felt to be exclusive to oneself, however, but can coexist with admiration of others, as well as gratitude for other people's contributions. It is *hubristic* pride, the bragging bluster of self-enhancement, claiming more for oneself than is right, at the heart of pathological narcissism (Tracy, Cheng, Robins & Tresbiewski, 2009).

Upon success, the narcissist emphasises stable self-attribution, and global self-evaluation. Rather than "I worked hard for that success" (emphasis on the specific action), someone higher in narcissism is more likely to feel, "This success shows I am a great person." (Emphasis is on their whole identity, what Tracy calls a falsely inflated, stable, global self). This means success is taken too seriously as a mark of their worth, while admitting failure becomes a "self-destructive agent of demoralisation," near impossible. This could be one reason why, as Gabbard observed, narcissists can age badly (2005, p. 508), often getting worse as they get older. If you begin with a grandiose self-conception "without commensurate achievement" and unconsciously fear global self-condemnation on failure, then the workplace becomes difficult. Instead of setting realistic goals, responding to set backs and criticism creatively, and learning from mistakes, the narcissist is likely to react badly and angrily, blaming others. They might also haughtily

avoid those testing but fulfilling endeavours in life that reward with authentic pride. In contrast, someone with authentic self-esteem is able to risk more, adapt to criticism and achieve more. Kernberg identified intense envy and difficulties with acknowledging dependency on others, and expressing gratitude. Studies show that more narcissistic people alienate others by claiming credit for themselves while airbrushing out other people's contributions.

When someone makes *global,* whole person self-evaluations, it is a clue to them being shame prone. One reason relationships with a narcissistic person may become aversive over time, is that they so rarely apologise. Rather they externalise and dump the fault in the other person. A number of studies show the shame prone nature of people higher in narcissism, where if one faulty action is admitted, the whole brittle edifice of their character might come toppling down. All societies and individuals have wrongs in their history. Attunement between people is never perfect, so the capacity to recognise a wrong done, and make a reparation to repair the breach is central to maintaining connection.

Academic psychologist June Tangney's work on shame and guilt is illuminating (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; see also Nathanson, 1994). Tangney shows that guilt, compared to shame, works in a more pro-social way. (She is not writing about excessive or morbid guilt which can accompany depression). People who are more likely to feel guilt when committing a wrong, compared with shame, are more likely to think of it as being about a certain *behaviour*. I did *that.* Their sense of self is not at stake, and does not come under threat. The behaviour is seen as a violation of internalised standards, and hence inconsistent with their sense of self. Such individuals, Tangney shows, are more likely to apologise and make efforts at a reparation to the wronged party. The fabric of the connection is strained – but does not break. With shame however, particularly bypassed shame, (disavowed and not acknowledged) Tangney found that the wrong doer was more likely to have their very sense of self challenged and threatened. There is excessive self-focus, as in *I* did that, which unleashes the possibility of annihilating shame. The threatened ego leads to lashing out in the shame/rage spiral that Kohut identified. The connection between people is ruptured rather than repaired.

Alexander Lowan writes of narcissistic rage,

Recognising the murderous quality to all such reactions…the insult provoking the reaction must strike a chord…in the person's unconscious memory of the earlier insult to which he or she could not respond when it occurred…. the insult was to the person's sense of self…the experience was one of humiliation, of being powerless (2012, p. 84).

When they were a child.

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In his powerful and haunting painting *Narcissus*, (1597-1599) Caravaggio takes us deep into a psychological portrait of narcissism. In this painting there is only Self. There is no Other. A solitary, melancholy figure is illuminated against a dark backdrop, his arms and

their mirror image framing a tight self-enclosed loop. All else ceases to exist, falls away, falls into darkness, obliterated from sight. Narcissus stares with intensity and desire at his own image in the pool. The root of the word narcissism is “narc,” also the root of narcotic, and the condition has an element of obsession, enchantment and addiction, not to a real self, but to an image. The painting also captures the psychic isolation, for there is only Narcissus and the pool on which his lonely image floats. One more representation by an artist deserves mention. In John Waterhouse’s *Echo and Narcissus* (1903), the nymph Echo is depicted as unseen and forlorn, languishing outside Narcissus’s line of vision.

What these works of art capture is that narcissism is a disorder where something has gone profoundly awry in the relationship of Self to Other. Francis Broucek, in *Shame and The Self* (1991), invokes the philosopher Martin Buber’s idea of the need to respond to others as a subject, not as an object, an I-Thou relationship rather than I- It. Objectifying the other is a central aspect of narcissistic relations; the narcissist, Broucek argues, relates to the other person as Self Subject – Other Object. But why? What might be the childhood of such a person?

Let me make a sideways move at this point, to consider narcissism’s nemesis; empathy. Sara Konrath and her colleagues have shown that at exactly the same moment in history that narcissism is rising, empathy has declined. Using a wide ranging meta- analysis in 2011, Konrath found that empathy displayed in college students from the 1970’s and 1980’s onward declined significantly. The decline was especially marked in the 2000’s (Konrath, O’Brien & Hsing, 2011). (Just as increases in narcissism occurred especially in the 2000’s.) Konrath also found that secure attachments (assessed in adult college populations) declined from 48 per cent in 1988 to 41 per cent in 2011, while insecure attachments rose from 51 to 58 percent. Avoidant or dismissing attachments, in particular, rose from just under 12 per cent in 1988 to almost 19 per cent in 2011 (Konrath, Chopnik, Hsing & O’Brien, 2014). There was also a decline in trust. By 2012, two thirds of Americans thought other people couldn’t be trusted, and mistrust was much more pronounced in younger people.

The development of empathy, as it happens, is at the centre of a very large and well verified body of research on the moral consequences of developing secure attachments in childhood (Karen, 1994; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson & Collins, 2009). Children with secure attachments tend to be more “mind minded,” able to “mentalise” as Peter Fonagy and his colleagues put it, able to imagine and empathise with the contents of other people’s minds- something so decidedly missing in narcissism (Fonagy, Jurist & Target, 2004; Fonagy & Target, 2001). They are also more pro-social, form better friendships, are more cooperative, and have more empathy. The kind of parenting which establishes secure attachments from infancy is warm, affectionate but limit setting, and has a contingent responsiveness- i.e. when a child is distressed the parents and caregivers act promptly to alleviate it and give comfort. An insecure anxious (ambivalent) attachment is associated with inconsistent parents tuning in some of the time but being unresponsive at others, so the child learns to up the ante, “lean out for love,” exaggerating fragility and distress because it is in those states they are finally responded to. They are more likely to

become fragile, demanding and needy children. In contrast, an avoidant attachment comes from parents who overvalue independence or expect it too early, responding coldly or even aggressively rebuffing dependency needs in a baby. An avoidant attachment is associated with less empathy and more aggression; bragging, bullying and dominant behaviour (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson & Collins, 2009). Such children have also been found to display an apparent self- sufficiency on separation from caregivers, while heart rate and cortisol levels are in fact high, revealing unexpressed distress (Spangler & Grossman, 1993).[1]

These childhood correlations have been shown to have an adult sequelae. Work on adult attachments shows that relationships are more likely to flourish and be stable with two "secure" adults. An avoidant attachment is associated with more relationship problems, a "Self-Good Other- Bad" model, a compulsive self-sufficiency and reluctance to depend on others, a lack of trust and empathy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). An ambivalent attachment might lead to adults who are excessively needy, placing unreasonable demands on others to be babied and cared for, exaggerating vulnerability and by their very insatiability, sadly alienating those they depend upon. Moreover, there is a consistent pattern of intergenerational transmission of different attachment patterns, although thankfully many individuals who begin with an insecure attachment need not reproduce it, if they are reflective enough and have a partner who helps them to develop "earned security."

With respect to adult narcissism, I am not suggesting that it maps perfectly over insecure attachment. Many avoidantly attached adults are more on the withdrawn, avoidant spectrum than the flamboyant narcissist! Others in the anxious attachment group might be closer to a borderline personality disorder. But there are aspects that do overlap between avoidant attachment and the overt, grandiose and oblivious narcissist on the one hand and the ambivalent, anxiously attached adult and the covert, vulnerable and thin-skinned narcissist on the other.

While not conclusive, a retrospective study by British psychologists Lorna Otway and Vivian Vignoles (i.e. of adults looking back at childhood) study examined several arguments; that the child is spoiled, overvalued and learns to trample on other people's rights because they are set no limits (Twenge & Campbell); that they have parents who are harsh, cold, lack empathy and devalue the child, so the grandiosity is compensatory and defensive (Kohut); and that it could be a combination, where a child is both overvalued and undervalued– showered with praise but the same parents might also be cold and unempathic (Freud) (2006, pp. 104-116).

Their study showed that it was Freud's view which was confirmed; "Seemingly the future narcissist receives constant praise from his or her caregiver, but this is accompanied by implicit messages of coldness and rejection rather than warmth and acceptance, and thus, we speculate, the praise- which is also indiscriminate- may come to seem unreal" (Otway & Vignoles, 2006, p. 113). They also found that covert narcissism was associated with anxious ambivalent attachments. One difficulty however, with retrospective studies such as these, is the narcissist's tendency to be dismissive of vulnerability and to self-

enhance. They may not admit that their parent devalued them. Hence longitudinal studies tracing parental behaviour with long term outcomes are important. Phoebe Cramer's longitudinal study tracked children from preschool on, and found that authoritarian parents who were cold and harsh, had the strongest relationship to narcissism, like wanting to be the centre of attention, histrionic tendencies, lacking empathy for others in preschool and to signs of pathological narcissism on adulthood (Cramer, 2011; see also Weise & Tuber, 2004).

Daniel Stern's concept of attunement in the relationship of caregiver and infant during early childhood offers even greater nuance in the possible aetiology of narcissism, beyond these broad categories of attachment (1985; 1995). Using slowed down videos of interactions between caregivers and infants, Stern challenged Freud's idea of primary narcissism, and showed that infants are orientated to social exchanges from their earliest moments. He also showed that exchanges between caregivers and infants are part of a prolonged "conversation." Stern caught on camera exquisitely timed and reciprocal exchanges of a positive kind. He called this "attunement." There are many mis-attunements too though, where the caregiver gets it wrong. At such moments, acting to promptly "repair" the disconnection is important. Stern calls these exchanges Repeated Interactions that are Generalised, (RIGS) and says they are crucial to developing what attachment scholars call an Internal Working Model of self and other. Stern makes a brilliant point;

It is clear that interpersonal communion, as created by attunement, will play an important role in the infant's coming to recognise their feeling states are forms of human experience that are shareable with other humans. The converse is also true: feeling states that are never attuned to will be experienced only alone, isolated from the interpersonal context of shareable experience. What is at stake here is nothing less than the shape of and extent of the shareable inner universe (1985, pp. 151-152).

Allan Schore, neuroscientist and psychologist takes this up in relation to the development of narcissism (1994). One of Schore's central contributions is to emphasise how attachment patterns profoundly shape our capacity for *emotional regulation*. Schore thinks unlike the borderline personality, the narcissist has got through infancy, even if insecurely attached, with a coherent sense of self. In the toddler period, however, he argues, the newly mobile toddler is elated, full of joy and energy at this newfound freedom. These inflated pride states rapidly oscillate with deflated shame states, as toddlers also fall, break things and incur parental anger. Prohibitions from caregivers at this age, average once every nine minutes. Intense shaming during this period, or only attuning when the toddler is in a grandiose state, Schore argues, may be associated with transformation of narcissism from a temporary state into a more stable trait. This reminds of Melanie Klein's richly layered concept of the "depressive phase" which emerges from the "paranoid schizoid" phase, where the young child, in an important developmental milestone, no longer splits the caregiver into two people, all Bad and All Good, but discovers that the mother who frustrates is the same mother who satisfies. This realisation brings a kind of new sobriety to the toddler and the integration of that into the

developing psyche allows for the exceptionally important development of guilt over the impulses to hurt the beloved mother who frustrates and the capacity for reparation during the practising period (Klein, 1998/1921-45).

In the toddler period, caregivers can reward positive emotional qualities in the child, but tune out from or discourage the processing and understanding of negative emotions. Schore cites one study which describes a boy who is at the “centre of the universe” where both parents are “circling around him.” The mother attunes “when the child is in a grandiose state,” and mirrors back her own narcissism. Then she ‘is emotionally accessible.” However, she “could not tolerate it when he was sad” (1994, p. 425). In fact, when he is in a shame state, she aggressively teases and humiliates him. To keep psychic closeness, the little boy learns he must be “up” in a pride state, and to eschew more natively toned emotions, where humiliation and shame lurks. It is this dysregulation, according to Schore, which means that shame states become avoided or “bypassed,” leading, as Silvan Tomkins suggested to

…the paradox of one part of the self-performing psychic surgery on another part of the self, so that the self which feels ashamed is totally and permanently split off and rejected by a judging self that has no tolerance for its *more humble and hesitant self* [emphasis added] (Tomkins in Schore, 1994, p. 426).

In contrast, another caregiver might be flatter, more depressed, and negatively toned in their interactions and find it hard to attune to aroused and elated states. They might be like the mother of Miss F in Kohut’s classic study. Her depressed mother it turned out, had deflected “all of Miss F’s needs onto herself.” Miss F would bounce home from school, “joyfully anticipating” telling her mother about some success, but her mother would never meet her joy, “appear to listen” but “imperceptibly the topic of conversation shifted and the mother began to talk about herself, her headache and her tiredness and her other physical, self-preoccupations.” How deflating! Our joy in life is amplified by being shared and mirrored by others while puncturing excitement with disinterest leads to shame; “Nothing she did as a girl evoked pleasure or approval” (Kohut, 1971, pp. 116-8). Schore thinks that such interactions, repeated over time, might lead to vulnerable narcissism and indeed Miss F would shriek angrily at Kohut if he so much as dared to make an interpretation (Kohut, 1971, pp. 116-8).

Although Schore emphasises the mother, this is surely somewhat dated, given that shared caregiving is more common. One could also consider those fathers who only tune into a child or are attentive at awards night! Schore does acknowledge that a “distant and humiliating father could exacerbate negative development” (1994, p. 427). Alternative non-familial caregivers in childcare centres also play a significant role in contemporary society. These caregivers can range from skilful and empathetic, to being harsh and discouraging of the natural sadness at separation from parents, so as to better promote the smooth functioning of the centre. Moreover, while Schore concentrates on pride and shame, one might flesh out the more precise content of such emotions in the light of contemporary anxieties around achievement. Rather than a simple enjoyment of a child’s very being, they may only be attuned to and gain attention when they achieve or

“produce” something. In the neo-liberal era, caring for a child became less about enjoying being *with* a child, and more about something you do *to* a child. As, Julie Stephens has perceptively observed, childrearing became about less about “the need for loving/nurturing care,” and more about “skills formation,” “maximising a child’s potential,” the extraction of productivity and achievement (2011, p. 126).

Hence there is ample opportunity for caregivers to interact in ways which disavow part of the child, while attuning, rewarding and bringing alive another. The acquisition of language, Stern argues, can further force apart a child’s actual experience and what emotions and experiences parents are willing to “name” and acknowledge (which becomes part of an avowed self) and what falls into shadow, becoming part of the “never saids” and disavowed, unacknowledged self of childhood. All this can shape not just distortions in a child’s emotional repertoire and expressiveness, but produce what Winnicott called a “false self”; one compliant with the way others want you to be. A parent “translates” the world to a small child, and one way of looking at the “mask” of narcissism, is as a false self, where part of the growing child has been lost in the parents’ translation.

Many analyses of the causes of narcissism, however, are limited by emphasising individual psychology, leaving the real life causes hanging in air, without a social and economic context. Parenting does not exist in a vacuum. I will now turn to why such distortions in parenting might be more present in contemporary society than in the past.

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Christopher Lasch has a brilliant passage in his early book *The Culture of Narcissism*. In a prophetic passage long before Facebook and the rest, he wrote about how in the “Society of the Spectacle” “prevailing conditions thus brought out narcissism personality traits that were present in everyone” (1991/1979, p. 239).

So what are the “prevailing conditions?” The rise of the “Selfie” and social media is one often cited reason, with opportunities for self- promotion and self enhancement in a superficial medium that encourages grandiose Postcards from Self to the world. However, most of the research shows that social media brings out already existing narcissism in people, rather than acting as a cause. One recent study found that vulnerable narcissists are especially prone to use social media in a problematic way to self-enhance, posting frequent updates, becoming addicted to promoting an online image of perfection, while also preferring social media and avoiding interacting with people in real life (Silvia, Giulia & Laura, 2016).

As I explain in my recent book, *The life of I: The new culture of narcissism* (2014), a more promising line of explanation is the cross cultural research which shows rises in narcissism accompany consumer capitalism. For example, while the U.S. is at the top of an ignoble League of Nations table of narcissism, as countries like China become more individualist and capitalist, they also become more narcissistic. Notably, over the very same period that narcissism has been observed to rise and empathy decline, Anglo American democracies made their great leap forward into the virulently competitive, free

market variant of capitalism, neo liberalism. It had a distinctly Social Darwinian aspect, marked by admiration for the strong and contempt for the weak, of “winners” and “losers,” “lifters” and “leaners,” caught in the title of Ayn Rand’s newly popular book, *The virtue of selfishness* (1964). The world became a harsher, less empathetic place, as ideals and practises of nurture were thinned out. Constant labour shedding boosted share prices, while throwing a hand grenade of insecurity into workplaces. Spiralling house prices propelled both parents into the workforce. However, reduction of government spending also meant that they struggled, unsupported by the lengthy periods of paid leave, sick leave and free, high quality child care available elsewhere in the world, but especially in Scandinavia. A withering judgment settled on all forms of dependency, which now carried a foul whiff of parasitism. Those dependent on government benefits, like sole parents, were regarded especially harshly. By implication, all dependency was now considered shameful.

A new character ideal emerged for both genders; an independent, self-sufficient individual who is one of life’s winners because they ruthlessly pursue self- interest, a description which when applied to the relational world, sounds very much like a narcissistic character! Just as Freud said of jokes and their relation to the unconscious, people began to discharge tension arising from the insecurities of the new risk society, by watching reality TV game shows with a distinct survival of the fittest quality, where greed was a vocation and brief alliances were formed before an opponent was shafted; *The Mole, Dog Eat Dog, Survivor, The Weakest Link, The Hunger Games,* and so on. In real life, as sociologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Picket observe, a “defensive narcissism” emerged as heavily indebted consumers living in the inner city bought ominous looking vehicles with names like Outlander, Defender, Trooper, Wrangler, Pathfinder, and Shogun Raider. “Not only did the popularity of SUV’s suggest a preoccupation with looking tough, but it also reflected growing mistrust, and the need to feel safe from others” (2009, p. 57).

Neo liberalism brought affluence for some, but also inequality. Despite rhetoric about a rising tide rising all boats, some rose higher than others. Inequality soared. During the 1950s for example, CEOs earned about 25-30 times what their employees did. By the neo- liberal era it was between 300 and 500 times as much. More unequal societies promote anxiety and depression (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Twenge, 2014/2006). Psychotherapists were at the front line of these social changes. As Petra Bueskens has observed, they offer an essential kind of paid nurturing or mothering. Seeking care however, became more difficult, as government rebates were rationed (2014, p. 85).

Inequality, it turns out, is at the heart of those “prevailing conditions” which “bring out the narcissism in all of us.” Psychologist Paul Piff, who has done some stunning new work on wealth and narcissism, is blunt enough to call it the “asshole effect” (2013). It is not the pathological and difficult to treat narcissism of NPD. It is mild and subclinical. But it is still important and pervasive. Piff’s studies found that as people grow wealthier, they are more likely to feel entitled, to become meaner and be more likely to exploit others, even to cheat (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng & Keltner, 2010; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton & Keltner, 2012).

Piff conducted a series of revealing experiments. In one, they simply watched at crossroads and pedestrian crossings to see which cars and drivers gave way. He found drivers of expensive, high-status vehicles were four times more likely to cut off drivers in older, cheaper vehicles. Drivers of high-status vehicles were three times as likely to fail to yield at pedestrian crossings. In contrast, *all* the drivers of the least expensive type of car gave way to pedestrians.

In Piff's psychology laboratory, the richest students were more likely to consider "stealing or benefiting from things to which they were not entitled" than those from a middle-class or lower-class background. Even people simply primed to feel rich, put their hand in the sweet jar and grabbed more lollies meant for children in a lab next door, than those primed to feel disadvantaged. Fascinated by these results, Piff and his colleagues then looked at what created these impulses to bad behaviour. The reason, it turns out, is that even thoughts of being wealthy can create a feeling of increased entitlement—you start to feel superior to everyone else and thus more deserving: something at the centre of narcissism.

In real life, Piff's research also shows a sense of entitlement to be often true of people who were better off. Wealthier people were more likely to agree with statements like "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than other people" and place themselves higher on a self-assessed "class ladder" that indicated increasing levels of income, education and job prestige. Told that they were about to have their photograph taken, well-off people were more likely to rush to the mirror to check themselves out and adjust their appearance. Asked to draw symbols, like circles, to represent how they saw themselves and others, more affluent people drew much larger circles for themselves and smaller ones for the rest of humankind. If you think of yourself as larger than life, larger and more important than other people, it is hardly surprising that your behaviour would become oriented towards getting what you think you deserve.

As Piff argues, this can go beyond the individual, to noxious social attitudes, like being punitive towards the poor while living the "Because I'm worth it" lifestyle. As a society becomes wealthier, it can get more narcissistic, less empathetic and unwilling to look after the vulnerable. Wealth cultivates attitudes that are against redistribution and for privilege. Greater feelings of entitlement leads to tax minimisation and avoidance by the upper classes. It is the logic of "I've earned it," "It's mine," and, "Why should I have to use my hard-earned cash for those inferior scroungers, the poor?" There is, however, an even deeper kind of identity formation in the new capitalism which needs to be excavated in considering narcissism and neo-liberalism.

In the L'Oreal ad for a men's skin care cream, TV star Patrick Dempsey gazes into the camera: "Because *you* are worth it." That phrase of course reeks of entitlement and narcissism. Hovering in the shadows, however, is the sense that *only* people like Dempsey are worth it while the rest…are not worth it. In reality, very few of us are neo liberalism's ideal type. Or to put it another way, in the shadow of the success narrative, the naked careerism, the self as a walking resume, lurks shame, the fear that you haven't made it, that you amount to nothing. The "Because I'm worth it" lifestyle is not the sturdy

identity based on solid self-respect, but is based on the roller coaster of inflation and deflation, an identity which is in need of constant bolstering, feeding on narcissistic supply. So how in a consumer society do you self-enhance gain high status and the admiration of others, and puff yourself up?

By consuming. The perfectibility of one's self in neo liberalism, is essential. Advertisers, those astute readers of a culture's pulse, as observers from Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2009/2000) onwards have noted, now frequently use narcissistic traits and centre their pitch less on the product and more on selling a self-enhancing identity carrying the lustre of success. People will pay that much for brand name because it confers a worthwhile self-enhancing identity on the wearer.

Without rising narcissism, such ploys might fall on deaf ears. New social psychology research has shown a very clear link between narcissism and consumption, thus aiding the new business strategy. Constantine Sedikides, a leading scholar on narcissism in the UK, gives evidence that the higher a person is on narcissism, the more orientated to high status brand names they will be. Narcissists are "self-centred, self-aggrandizing, show-offs, and prone to illusions of superiority and specialness" (Sedikides, Cisek & Hart in Campbell & Miller, 2011, p. 382). Prime targets surely, for brand name consumerism. Not all people are equally susceptible to the allure of high status brand names. In "Narcissism and Brand Name Consumerism," Sedikides and his fellow researchers argue "We submit that there is a particular type of self that is likely to be enhanced through conspicuous consumption, and this is the narcissistic self" (p. 382). Conspicuous consumption, especially of high status, prestige "brand names," is a form of potent self-enhancement, to bolster a grandiose self-image in a materialistic society and one of the easiest to engage in.

Narcissists who are on the "inflated by pride deflated by shame" roller coaster, are more susceptible to the competitive nature of consumption as they do not have egos which can easily withstand the bruising realisation of others being more successful or having more and better possessions. Intriguing experiments bear out this sense of fragility; when people focus on their sadness for example, they will spend relatively higher amounts of money for a product. Self-doubt and insecurity predict materialism. High status products have a "reparative effects on the self." Insecure people often see life as a plebiscite on their worth, material success as a verdict. When people agreed with such items as "I often wish I felt more certain of my strengths and weaknesses," they were also more likely to agree with measures of materialism such as "Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure," and "The things I own say a lot about how well I am doing in life." If participants in a lab setting were primed with words suggesting self-doubt, they immediately rated higher on materialism. It also worked the other way. In one study, high self-esteem and psychological security *reduced* materialism. And thoughts of death- the ultimate ontological insecurity – also markedly *increased* materialism. The scholars concluded that it is "motivation to increase self-worth then, is what drives brand name consumption." If we have children, as noted earlier, who are increasingly insecure, then the implication is that they will be more susceptible to the seductions of consumerism.

Neo-liberal values have colonised the life world, creating a new social ecology. Rather than blaming individual parents for the rise of narcissism, is it any wonder that under such conditions, rates of insecurity and narcissism have been increasing? New forms of shame and anxiety over performance also attended the new succeed at any cost ethic. Suniyar Luther's studies (Luthar, Barkin & Crossman, 2013) found children of affluent parents often struggled more psychologically than children from less materially well off backgrounds (Luthar, 2013; see also Leake, 2013). Children were more anxious but also more narcissistic. Over-worked parents led to children being home alone more, with emotional support replaced by an ideology of "self-care." Children were pressured to be "productive," delivering high achievements in order to protect against the future risk of an insecure and highly competitive workplace. Likewise, outside institutions where children now spend so much time, from pre-school to university, have a stake in children's test scores reflecting well on them. The "excessive demands" to be not just capable but a "star," Luther found, can be crushing. Extrinsic goals like money, status, career, success and fame have steadily taken over from intrinsic goals, like caring for others, relationships, and personal development. In 1967, 86 per cent of US freshman rates 'developing a meaningful philosophy of life' as an essential life goal. By 2004 only 42 per cent did. A Harvard study of young people's attitudes in 2014 showed that about 80 per cent valued achievement while only 20 percent valued caring for others as their most important goal. What the hell we have been teaching young people, the researchers asked? (Luther, 2013).

Indeed. These broader social and economic changes also bring us closer to the real life causes of narcissism in the contemporary world, which is less about a simple spoiling and more about material indulgence and inattentiveness combined with a relentless pressure to achieve. Or as the psychoanalyst John Fiscalini put it so well, "These children get what they do not need and don't get what they do need" (Fiscalini & Grey, 1993, p. 82). One consequence is that a "more humble and hesitant self," keenly aware of one's impact on other people, responsive to the claims of others for recognition and attentiveness, might go into exile. Instead, what flourishes is the pursuit of attention to self – the "Look at Me!" strategies of survival in both forms of narcissism that Brookner identified (1982). An oblivious narcissist like Donald Trump brags, blusters and bullies his way into prominence, while vulnerable narcissists hover compulsively on Facebook, checking over again how many "Likes" their latest post has received.

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[1] By no means all recent studies, however, find cortisol to be elevated in “anxious avoidant” infants.

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