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The culture of (female) narcissism

Could inflated egos coupled with old cultural expectations be the cause of women's increasing unhappiness?

Judy Berman

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As studies about women's happiness (or, it turns out, lack thereof) keep rolling in, journalists continue to ask themselves the same question: Why, as we inch ever closer to equality of the sexes, are ladies more dissatisfied than ever? This week's attempt at an answer comes from the Guardian's Madeleine Bunting, who pegs a cultural epidemic of narcissism as the cause.

Bunting runs through a list of studies that have, by now, become familiar to those of us covering the lady beat: There is, of course, Stevenson and Wolfers' "[The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness](#)" (PDF), the document that provided proof that while, in the '70s, women were happier than men, men are now happier than women. (This is also the study that prompted token New York Times conservative Ross Douthat to reach the bizarre [conclusion](#) that since "the steady advance of single motherhood threatens the interests and happiness of women ... some kind of social stigma is a necessity.") Bunting also cites [research by West and Sweeting](#), which studied mental illness among 15-year-olds in Scotland in 1987, 1999 and 2006:

When the 1999 results were published, there was concern that the incidence of common mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, panic attacks and anhedonia (loss of capacity to experience pleasure) had significantly increased for girls from 19% to 32%. The increase for boys was much smaller, at only 2%. But the latest set of results are even more dramatic. There has been an increase for both sexes: boys are now on 21%, and girls are at a staggering rate of 44%.

Bunting dismisses the idea that this is solely a teenage phenomenon, citing statistics that show the mental health gender gap holding steady through old age. She also examines a few possible explanations: "Women's levels of serotonin are more vulnerable, it has been suggested, but that doesn't explain the change over time. Women are struggling with work and family, looking after their elderly parents, or coping with empty nest after children have left." But it seems important to note that, while it's well established that disorders in the depression and anxiety spectrum affect women at higher rates, the research Bunting cites doesn't touch on changes in rates of mental illness that are more prevalent in men, such as [alcoholism and antisocial personality disorder](#).

What Bunting adds to the ongoing conversation about women's mental health and happiness is the suggestion that these changes have something to do with a culture-wide increase in narcissistic behavior. She cites the work of Jean Twenge, author of the book "[The Narcissism Epidemic](#)," who performed a meta-analysis of 37,000 college students. The results? While in 1982, 15 percent scored high on a narcissistic personality index, that figure had skyrocketed to a quarter of respondents in 2006. And Twenge noticed the largest spike among young women.

As Bunting explains, because the narcissist has such lofty, often unattainable goals, she is bound to be unhappy:

The narcissist has huge expectations of themselves and their lives. Typically, they make predictions about what they can achieve that are unrealistic, for example in terms of academic grades and employment. They seek fame and status, and the achievement of the latter leads to materialism – money enables the brand labels and lavish lifestyle that are status symbols. It is the Paris Hilton syndrome across millions of lives.

What Bunting fails to mention is that narcissistic personality disorder still [affects men at greater rates](#) than women. And, honestly, it's hard for me to get too upset about Twenge's findings that "in the 1950s only 12% of college students agreed that 'I am an important person', but by the late 80s it was 80%. In 1967, only 45% agreed that 'being well-off is an important life goal', but by 2004 the figure was 74%." These are vague statements: "I am an important person"... compared to whom? Does "well-off" mean "wealthy" or "financially comfortable" or simply "stable"? Can't you just see the hand-wringing articles that would follow the revelation that, for example, 80 percent of young women agree with the statement, "I am not an important person"? I don't imagine women answering the latter question in the affirmative would be any happier than their peers.

Still, Bunting's conclusion (unlike Douthat's) is worth considering. "The expectations of girls and women have multiplied and intensified -- on every front, from passing exams to looking good and having more friends and better photos on Facebook," she writes, going on to note that relationships have historically been the focus of women's existences. "Relationality' is still central to how women see their lives, and yet it is entirely at odds with an individualistic, intensely competitive, narcissistic culture. Women, brought up to seek social approval, battle between competing frames of reference, and many end up feeling failure and inadequacy on multiple fronts." So because women can't afford to choose between preserving relationships and competing in a traditionally male culture of narcissism, they feel pressure to succeed at both, and, as a result, have to contend with more sources of stress than their male counterparts.

If we agree with Bunting, then the question is obvious: How do we fix this without setting feminism back half a century or repressing millennia of cultural training? I don't fault Bunting for failing to tackle that quandary, because I can't fathom a realistic answer, either.

-- **Judy Berman**

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