

Do western societies promote narcissism?

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Universitätsmedizin Berlin report that people who grew up in the former western states of Germany have higher levels of narcissism than those whose socialization took place in the former eastern states. Between 1949 and 1989/90, life in West Germany was characterized by a culture of individualism, with life in East Germany was based on more collectivist principles. Both types of societies had a major impact on citizens' levels of self-esteem and, further, on narcissistic tendencies. According to research published in the journal *Plos One*, the reunification of Germany ushered in a gradual re-balancing of the distribution of these traits among the younger generation.

"Narcissism" refers to excessive self-love and self-centeredness. Narcissism is only considered a pathological phenomenon if the condition has a negative impact on the patient and if he or she develops symptoms of [narcissistic personality disorder](#). Researchers led by Prof. Dr. Stefan Röpke and Dr. Aline Vater (Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy on Campus Benjamin Franklin) report that a person's inflated sense of self-importance develops in response to

societal influences. "Contemporary western societies promote narcissism. People who grew up on the western side of the former East-West border or West-Berlin had [higher levels](#) of narcissism than those who spent their childhood in the former German Democratic Republic," explains Prof. Röpke. He adds, "In our study, this was shown to apply primarily to 'grandiose narcissism,' a type of narcissism that is characterized by an exaggerated sense of superiority."

Results obtained in relation to [self-esteem](#) painted quite the opposite picture, with higher scores recorded for people in the former East Germany. For this study, the researchers analyzed data collected as part of an anonymous online survey of German citizens. Out of a total of more than 1,000 respondents who completed the questionnaire, approximately 350 were born in the former GDR, and approximately 650 in the former Federal Republic of Germany. During their analysis, the researchers drew a distinction between 'subclinical' (borderline) narcissism—a natural personality trait that is often referred to as healthy narcissism—and a pathological sense of superiority, which goes far beyond what might be considered healthy. Self-esteem was assessed using an established rating scale widely used in research.

As both borderline and pathological narcissism are associated with low self-esteem, the group of Berlin-based researchers set out to compare levels of narcissism and self-esteem in the German population. They found a clear age-related cohort effect: "No difference can be found within the younger generation—people who had either not been born at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, or had not yet reached [school age](#), and who therefore grew up within the same western society. In this group, the levels of narcissism and self-esteem recorded are the same for respondents from both the former East and West Germany," says Dr. Aline Vater, the study's first author. The clearest effect can be seen in those aged between 6 (school age) and 18 (adulthood) years at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Some differences

remained within the oldest cohort (i.e., those aged 19 and over at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall), at least with regard to subclinical (or borderline) narcissism. "Overall, our results suggest that levels of narcissism and self-esteem are influenced by societal factors. Western societies appear to promote increased levels of [narcissism](#) among their citizens," concludes Prof. Röpke.

More information: Aline Vater et al, Does a narcissism epidemic exist in modern western societies? Comparing narcissism and self-esteem in East and West Germany, *PLOS ONE* (2018).

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