



## Press Release No. 102/2017

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### Is there a narcissism epidemic?

**University of Konstanz psychologists test the theory of an increase in narcissism - and discover the opposite**

**Is our society becoming increasingly narcissistic? Researchers have proposed that an increase in narcissism is occurring from generation to generation and even speak of a “narcissism epidemic” in our society. A team of psychologists led by Dr Eunike Wetzel from the University of Konstanz tested this assumption by analysing about 60,000 personality tests completed by US-American students over the course of three decades. The research results are surprising: Narcissism has not increased over the past 25 years, but has instead decreased slightly. The observed decrease has been continuous since the early 1990s and started even before the economic crisis began. The results of this analysis are published in the journal “Psychological Science”.**

“We had expected to first observe an increase in narcissism between 1992 and the 2000s and then a possible decrease after the end of the economic crisis. Instead, we were surprised by the results of our study”, says Eunike Wetzel, a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Psychology at the University of Konstanz. Classical theories assume that periods of economic growth foster the development of narcissism while economic crises are associated with sinking levels of narcissism. Wetzel’s results, however, paint an entirely different picture: the decrease in narcissism had already begun during the economically stable period before the economic crisis.

For their study, the psychologists analysed data collected since 1992 via standardised narcissism personality tests at three US-American universities. About 60,000 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 24 completed the personality test. “We were not investigating narcissism as a clinical disorder like the narcissistic personality disorder”, Wetzel states. “We wanted to analyse narcissism in the general population. We investigated narcissism as a personality trait, like extraversion or conscientiousness. Just as some people are more conscientious than others, some tend to be more narcissistic than others”, Wetzel explains.

“Previous research only analysed narcissism as a single construct. The problem in doing so, is that narcissism is comprised of several different components”, Eunike Wetzel elaborates. For this reason, the psychologist focused on three main facets of narcissism - leadership, vanity and

entitlement - and analysed their prevalence over the course of three decades. The greatest decrease was observed in the area of “entitlement”, or whether a person feels like he/she is more valuable than and superior to others. “This is particularly interesting because this characteristic, combined with “vanity”, is at the very core of narcissism. The fact that these aspects in particular have decreased, contradicts the thesis that postulates the existence of a narcissism epidemic”, Wetzel concludes.

Men and women showed similar decreases in the facets of “entitlement” and “leadership”. In contrast, psychologists observed a general decline in “vanity” only among women. On average, men were found to be more narcissistic than women.

**Original publication:**

Wetzel, E., Brown, A., Hill, P. L., Chung, J. M., Robins, R. W., & Roberts, B. W. (2017). The narcissism epidemic is dead; long live the narcissism epidemic. *Psychological Science*, Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0956797617724208

**Facts:**

- Study on narcissism based on 60,000 personality tests completed by US-American undergraduate students from 1992 to the present
- Survey data provided by: students from the University of California, Berkeley, the University of California, Davis, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (all USA)
- The proportion of women in the data samples was between 55 percent (1992) and 72 percent (2015).
- Universities participating in the study:  
the University of Konstanz, University of Magdeburg, University of Kent (United Kingdom), Carleton University (Canada), Tilburg University (The Netherlands), University of California, Davis (USA), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA)

**Note to editors:**

An image summarising the results is available for download here:  
<http://bit.ly/2hD4IUe>

Caption: A decrease in narcissism observed over three decades, with particular focus on the aspects of leadership, vanity and entitlement. Image: Dr Eunike Wetzel, University of Konstanz

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