

Golec de Zavala, A. (2012). Collective narcissism. In D. J. Christie (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.

### **Collective narcissism**

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A belief that others do not appropriately recognize superiority and special entitlements of one's own group has inspired atrocities committed against other groups, including acts of terrorism, violent revolutions, aggressive wars and genocides. For example, Germans, under the Nazi regime, believed their right to a better living space and 'pure blood' was not properly appreciated by others. These beliefs were used to legitimize aggressive war and the Holocaust. Islamist terrorists believe they fight a *defensive* Jihad that mandates them to kill those who do not acknowledge the superiority of their values and lifestyle. In 1970s, members of the American radical leftist group, the Weather Underground, believed that the exceptional nobility of their cause (ending the war in Vietnam; advancement of social justice and equality or opposition against the regime they perceived as corrupt) entitled them to put the lives of other people in danger.

An inflated belief in one's own superiority and the need of its constant recognition and validation by others are characteristic for narcissism. This narcissism is collective, rather than individual, when the beliefs concern a group. Thus, collective narcissism is defined as an emotional investment in a belief about the unparalleled greatness of one's own group that is contingent on continuous validation from others (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson & Jayawickreme, in press). People can be narcissistic about almost any social group with which they share some, even if limited, common history. Collective narcissism refers to a form of favoritism to one's group that is particularly likely to be accompanied by enmity against other groups and aggression between groups.

The notion of collective narcissism was first introduced (although not analyzed in great detail) in the context of intellectual efforts to understand the rise of fascism in Germany. It was used to explain a way of thinking and feeling about a national group that was linked to an extreme form of prejudice against minorities within their own society and aggressiveness against other nationalities. Members of the Frankfurt School, most notably sociologist and philosopher Theodore Adorno, proposed that collective narcissism that feeds on socially shared delusions, prejudice and superstition serves as a means of protecting weak egos from feelings of impotence and self-blame. According to this conceptualization, inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, a weak ego is dissolved in an idealized, omnipotent group. As group members, people can claim possession of the desirable characteristics they attribute to the group and thus, indirectly, satisfy their own frustrated needs of self-actualization. Modern economic and social conditions, in which people need to constantly assert their status in invisible but strict hierarchies according to unclear and unspoken rules, make them feel uncertain, alienated and powerless and enhance their narcissistic identification with a group (Adorno, 1951).

Contemporary psychology confirms that the self and its group are closely linked. Thinking about a group activates the same area in the brain as thinking about the self (Volz, Kessler & von Cramon, 2009). People use self-knowledge in order to ascribe characteristics to newly constructed groups (Otten, 2002) and those with high personal self-esteem evaluate their groups more positively than those with low self-esteem (Gramzow & Gaertner, 2005). Collective self-esteem that refers to subjective evaluation of one's own group is a better predictor of intergroup attitudes than personal self-esteem (e.g. Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990).

Psychology has explored the concept of individual narcissism and its interpersonal consequences. Since people can be narcissistic about their personal identities, it is likely that they can be narcissistic about their collective identities. Thus, the concept of collective

narcissism extends into the intergroup domain the concept of individual narcissism. What lies in the core of collective narcissism is an inflated image of an in-group, rather than the self. Studies indicate that individual narcissism is positively associated with collective narcissism and both variables predict anger and aggressiveness, although independently and in different contexts. Individual narcissism is a ‘risk factor’ that contributes to a violent and aggressive response to perceived provocation in *interpersonal* interactions (e.g. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Collective narcissism predicts prejudice and aggressiveness in *intergroup* relations. Importantly, collective narcissism predicts intergroup hostility over and above other such robust predictors of prejudice and intergroup aggression as nationalism, blind patriotism, in-group glorification, authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and superiority beliefs about a group. (See also Encyclopedia entries on Patriotism & Nationalism by Christie, Social Dominance Theory by Pratto, and Authoritarian Personality by Cohrs et al.)

### **Collective Narcissism and Intergroup Hostility**

Collective narcissism predicts intergroup hostility in the context of threat to the group’s image. It is also related to an inability to forgive and forget former threats, aggression and wrongs done to the group by other groups. Collective narcissism predicts support for coercive military actions in response to a perceived threat from external aggression. It is also related to support for aggressive actions in ambiguous intergroup situations that collective narcissists interpret as insulting to the group and its members (e.g. construction of the wall along the Mexican-American boarder initiated by the U.S. was perceived by some Mexicans as an insult towards Mexico and Mexicans). Collective narcissism also predicts aggressive reactions to group directed criticism, especially when that criticism concerns controversial behaviors that the members of the group perceive differently than those criticizing (e.g. British troops operating in Iraq can be seen as a ‘noble act’ or alternatively, as an illegitimate occupation; Poles can be perceived either as anti-Semitic or heroic when their behaviors

towards Polish-Jewish people during WWII are considered). Collective narcissists see such criticism as threatening the group's image. They feel angry and use aggression to punish those who undermine the group. Collective narcissists react with increased hostility towards other groups not only when the positivity of the group's image is threatened, but also its clarity. They tend to dislike other groups more intensely when similarities between these groups and their own group (or/and their common membership in a superordinate social group) are emphasized (e.g. among British collective narcissists, negative feelings towards fellow nationals of the European Union increase when they focus on their common European citizenship rather than on their national group membership). To sum up, collective narcissism predicts retaliatory aggressiveness in response to different kinds of intergroup threat.

### **Collective Narcissism and Prejudice**

Even outside of the context of the immediate intergroup threat, collective narcissism is associated with enduring negative stereotyping and prejudice against certain social groups. For example, national collective narcissism is related to anti-Semitism in Poland. This relationship is driven by the perception of the 'gentile Pole' group as vulnerable and exposed to external hostility and the stereotypical perception of Jewish people as particular exemplification of this hostility.

Importantly, collective narcissism is related to negativity towards known out-groups - immediate neighbors or ethnic minorities - but not groups that are geographically or culturally distant and less relevant for the construction of the group's image. Since frequent intergroup relations are hardly ever entirely smooth and peaceful, and collective narcissists are unable to forgive or forget the wrongs done to the group by other groups, they are likely to feel chronically threatened and prejudiced against groups with whom they share a history of perceived grievances. In addition, small, rather than big, differences are threatening to the clarity and maintenance of the positive group's image. Those who are very much like us but at

some point chose a different way or belief, bring about a threat that what was chosen by us might have not been the best or the smartest. Thus, collective narcissists are likely to feel threatened by, and prejudiced against, groups with which they can compare - because they are physically close to them or because they are, in some important respect, similar to them.

### **The Nature of Narcissistic Group Esteem**

Why is collective narcissism related to intergroup hostility and prejudice? The answer to this question is likely to lie in the nature of the narcissistic group esteem. For individual narcissists interpersonal aggression is a means of defending the grandiose self-image. They invest emotionally in their high opinion of themselves, demand that others confirm that opinion, and punish those who seem unlikely to do so. Since they require constant validation of unrealistic greatness of the self, they are likely to continually encounter threats to their self image and be chronically intolerant of them.

Analogously, collective narcissism is exaggerated, but insecure, *collective* self-esteem. It consists of a very high regard for and glorification of the group. This is accompanied by a conviction that others do not appreciate the group's greatness sufficiently and, consequently, treat it unfairly. Importantly, collective narcissism is related to self-reported, high esteem of the group accompanied by a lack of its positive regard on the implicit level: a level of automatic and uncontrolled evaluations that are not fully accessible to conscious reflection. In other words, collective narcissists, possibly, doubt the greatness of their group quite unconsciously. Even if they are aware of these doubts they do not acknowledge them. Instead, they report high certainty of their positive opinion about their group.

Thus, it is plausible that collective narcissists feel that their group is unfairly treated by others because no treatment or recognition can be good enough for their deserving group. In addition, they are on a constant look out for signs of threat to the exaggerated group's image because, at least partially, willingly or not, and knowingly or not, they question the group's

greatness themselves. To some extent, the threat to the highly positive group's image seems to come from within rather than without. Aggressive responses to the perceived threat serve as a means of protecting the group's image and maintaining high group esteem

High collective self-esteem and collective narcissism are positively related. High regard for the group is likely to be where they overlap. The security and stability is probably where they differ. This difference between secure and narcissistic collective self-esteem has important consequences for intergroup relations. Collective narcissism and positive collective self-esteem function as mutual suppressors reducing the association each has with attitudes towards other groups. When their overlap is controlled, high collective self-esteem, without its narcissistic aspects, is related to positive attitudes towards other groups and trust in others. Collective narcissism, without secure and constructive collective self-esteem, predicts negative attitudes towards other groups and perceived unfair treatment of the group by others. In other words, this aspect of collective narcissism, which does not overlap with positive collective self-esteem, seems to be responsible for the relationship between collective narcissism and intergroup aggressiveness. It is likely to pertain to narcissistic need to ascertain special status and privilege to the group.

### **Summary**

Collective narcissism is a form of high but insecure group regard that needs constant, external validation, but accepts no validation as sufficient. It is accompanied by unacknowledged doubts about the group's highly positive evaluation. Collective narcissists are sensitive to anything that undermines their group's exaggerated image. The threat to the group's image, at least partially, comes from within, rather than outside. In some situations collective narcissists feel particularly threatened: when expecting hostility from others or when exposed to group directed criticism; social rejection or unfavorable intergroup comparisons. Collective narcissists feel chronically threatened by groups with whom they

share common history or with whom they come in frequent contact. For collective narcissists the habitual reaction to perceived intergroup threat is a hostile tendency to punish those who undermine the greatness of the group.

Important questions that studies on collective narcissism have raised concern the types of situations that inspire narcissistic beliefs about a group and conditions in which such beliefs become widely accepted, rather than rejected even by people who are initially not collectively narcissistic. Situations that may increase narcissistic beliefs about a group are likely to pertain to the realization that special achievements, sacrifices or contributions by a group are not being understood, or recognized by others. Furthermore, situations of increased personal uncertainty can bring about narcissistic group sentiments. Recent developments in the psychology of individual narcissism suggest that in certain situations narcissistic aggression can be reduced. If it is possible to reduce or constructively redirect narcissistic anger in interpersonal situations, it may well be possible to constructively channel or reduce intergroup hostility inspired by hurt collective narcissistic pride. Exploration of this possibility can inform and inspire effective interventions aiming at improving intergroup relations.

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#### Key Terms

Collective narcissism, social identity, intergroup threat, group directed criticism, retaliatory aggression, hostility, prejudice, explicit and implicit collective self-esteem, insecure collective self-esteem.

#### Bio

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