

## Grandiose narcissism reflects U.S. presidents' bright and dark sides

November 7 2013, by Carol Clark

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Narcissus was doomed to pine away his life, riveted by his own reflection.

Narcissus, the physically flawless character of Greek mythology who wound up falling in love with his own reflection, hardly seems like a good role model. For those dreaming of becoming president of the United States, however, some narcissistic traits may be worth fostering, suggests an analysis by Emory psychologists.

They found that grandiose narcissism in U.S. [presidents](#) is associated with ratings by historians of overall greatness of presidencies, as well as high marks for public persuasiveness, crisis management, risk-taking, winning the popular vote and initiating legislation. On the flip side, the study showed that grandiose narcissism is also associated with some negative outcomes, such as presidential impeachment resolutions, cheating and bending rules.

The journal *Psychological Science* is publishing the results of the analysis, led by Ashley Watts, a graduate student of psychology at Emory, and Scott Lilienfeld, Emory professor of psychology. Co-authors included Emory psychologist Irwin Waldman and graduate student Sarah Francis Smith, as well as University of Georgia psychologists Joshua Miller and Keith Campbell, both recognized experts on narcissism.

"Most people think of narcissism as predominantly maladaptive," Watts says, "but our data support the theory that there are bright and dark sides to grandiose narcissism."

Lyndon B. Johnson scored highest on markers of grandiose narcissism, followed by Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy.

"It's interesting to me that these are memorable presidents, ones that we tend to talk about and learn about in history classes," Watts says. "Only rarely, however, do we talk about most of those who had low ratings for grandiose narcissism, like Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore."



Lyndon B. Johnson was known both for getting tough legislation passed, and for being "a bit of a bully," Lilienfeld says.

The researchers also found that presidents exhibit elevated levels of grandiose narcissism compared with the general population, and that presidents' grandiose narcissism appears to be rising over time.

"As the importance of television and other media has grown in presidential elections, this could be giving an edge to those with the attention-seeking, outgoing personalities associated with grandiose narcissism," Lilienfeld says.

In psychology terms, narcissism comprises at least two largely distinct patterns of behavior associated with different traits. Vulnerable narcissism is marked by excessive self-absorption, introversion and oversensitivity. Grandiose narcissism, on the other hand, is characterized by

an extroverted, self-aggrandizing, domineering and flamboyant interpersonal style.

"We don't believe there is a specific dividing line between normal and clinical narcissism," Lilienfeld says. "It's probably inherently blurred in nature."

Their analyses drew upon personality assessments of 42 presidents, up to and including George W. Bush, compiled by co-authors Steven Rubenzer and Thomas Faschingbauer for their book "Personality, Character and Leadership in the White House." More than 100 experts, including biographers, journalists and scholars who are established authorities on one or more U.S. presidents, evaluated their target presidents using standardized psychological measures of personality, [intelligence](#) and behavior.

For rankings on various aspects of job performance, the analysis relied primarily on data from two large surveys of presidential historians: One conducted by C-SPAN in 2009 and a second conducted by Siena College in 2010.



A queen obsessed with being "the fairest of them all" illustrates a worst-case scenario of narcissism and leadership in the classic fairy tale "Snow White."

Lyndon Johnson's mixed presidential legacy reflects both positive and negative outcomes tied to grandiose narcissism, Lilienfeld says. "Johnson was assertive, and good at managing crises and at getting legislation passed. He also had a reputation for being a bit of a bully and antagonistic."

Franklin D. Roosevelt, he adds, was also a highly assertive, dominant personality, but not particularly antagonistic or impulsive.

"In U.S. history, there is an enormous variety in presidential leadership style and success," Lilienfeld says. "One of the greatest mysteries in politics is what qualities make a great leader and which ones make a disastrous, failed leader. Grandiose narcissism may be one important part of the puzzle."

The study of [narcissism](#) and the presidency follows an earlier analysis by Lilienfeld and colleagues that showed that the fearless dominance associated with psychopathy may be an important predictor of U.S. presidential performance.

Provided by Emory University

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