

# Rates of narcissism lower than national perception

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Americans consistently reported a perception of the typical U.S. citizen as highly narcissistic—even meeting diagnostic criteria for the psychiatric disorder, according to studies conducted by University of Georgia psychologists in collaboration with colleagues from around the world.

The reality is that fewer than one in 100 individuals meets the diagnostic criteria for the [narcissistic personality disorder](#) in most epidemiological surveys, marking it as a relatively rare disorder.

Narcissism is associated with excessive interest in oneself and one's appearance and ranges from self-confidence to extreme selfishness, with a grandiose view of one's own talents, self-absorption and a desire for attention and admiration.

The study, "Narcissism and United States' Culture: The View from Home and Around the World," was published in September in the early online edition of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

The published research represents six studies that include surveys of American college students, American adults and participants from around the world about their perception of Americans. Two of the studies include data from citizens of other world regions (Basque Country, China, England and Turkey), in which citizens were asked to rate citizens of their own regions, as well as from the U.S.

Data from international samples indicated some general tendency to rate the citizens of one's country or region as more narcissistic than acquaintances or oneself—that is, these findings were not specific to America. However, the differences in these ratings (self versus citizens in general) were smaller in other countries than they were in the U.S., meaning these perceptions are particularly elevated in America.

Although non-Americans from many other parts of the world viewed the typical American as highly narcissistic, they did not cast U.S. citizens in a purely negative light.

"They also said Americans are less neurotic, as well as more extroverted and conscientious, so it wasn't just an indiscriminate criticism of Americans," said study co-author Joshua Miller, a professor and director of the clinical training program in the UGA Franklin College of Arts and Sciences' department of psychology. "It was a specific profile of traits that just happens to be very consistent with what we call grandiose narcissism—these sort of hyper confident, aggressive, assertive individuals."

In fact, Americans in the surveys held harsher opinions of their fellow citizens. The profile Americans hold of the typical American was more uniformly negative. The researchers posit these perceptions may, in part, be the results of an emphasis on celebrity culture and the rapidly growing influence and role of social media.

"We are inundated with images and information about people from groups who tend to score higher on narcissism," Miller said. "That doesn't mean all celebrities are narcissistic. Some may be, and we might incorrectly assume others are on the information available to us in the public domain."

Evidence indicates the perception of American narcissism is worse than the actual incidence—and skewed by the fact that, in the survey, respondents considered a limited array of people.

"People likely don't think of their 320 million fellow citizens who live in this country when completing these ratings but of particularly salient examples who may well be narcissistic—and they are extroverted, perhaps over-exposed, and that is reflected in these perceptions," Miller said.

One of the studies demonstrated that Americans did not uniformly see all Americans as equally narcissistic when given specific exemplars to rate. Instead, research participants rated younger Americans, male Americans and Americans in highly visible and high-status occupations (such as athletes and politicians) as particularly narcissistic.

"It's interesting that the perception of the typical person, which is essentially a measure of the culture, is so much more narcissistic than the actual people in the culture," said study co-author Keith Campbell, a professor and head of the department of psychology. "We might have a narcissistic culture, but the people aren't necessarily all narcissistic."

The researchers agreed that much in the profile of Americans held by Americans and non-Americans alike was not necessarily indicative of general psychopathology. Instead, the perception was relatively narrow and specific in its focus on narcissism.

"Americans are not viewed as pathologically retreating, submissive or shy. It's the tendency to act out, externalizing blame and consume more resources than you deserve that is specifically seen as a defining characteristic of Americans," Miller said.

"The bad news is everyone else in the world agrees. And there's consensus with the world, so we have this very interesting bias for how we see ourselves as a culture," Campbell said.

"But the silver lining is we're not as bad as we think."

**More information:** "Narcissism and United States' Culture: The View From Home and Around the World." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Sep 21, 2015, [dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039543](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039543)

Provided by University of Georgia

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