

How the West became a self-obsessed culture

A new book explores the history of individualism in the West.

[Sean Illing](#) Mar 5, 2019, 10:55am EST

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America has a narcissism problem.

This was the conclusion [of a recent study](#) published in the journal *Psychological Science*, in which researchers polled just under 3,000 Americans across 50 states and found that many of them have an outsize and inaccurate view of the importance of their state's role in US history.

They refer to this phenomenon as “collective narcissism.” An individual narcissist is someone with a deep need for validation, someone who thinks they're great and resents anyone who doesn't recognize their greatness. Collective narcissists, [as my Vox colleague Brian Resnick explained](#), are “a group of people who desperately need their group to be admired and validated by others.”

Collective narcissism is a fashionable idea these days in psychology, and it's linked to psychologists' larger concern about a “[narcissism epidemic](#)” — more and more individuals with an inflated sense of self.

It's tempting to blame self-indulgent tools like social media and smartphones for this so-called epidemic, and [many do](#). But that's not quite right, or at least that's the argument that Will Storr makes in his book [Selfie: How We Became](#)

[*So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us*](#). Western culture has always been this way, Storr argues, and over time we've built up a culture that conditions us to overstate our role in our own successes and failures.

Storr, a British novelist and journalist, [has previously written](#) about human credulity and how the stories we tell ourselves about the world color our beliefs about what's true. A book like *Selfie* seems like a departure from this, but it's not. This, too, is a book about beliefs and their consequences. And it's not merely a snapshot of internet culture; it's really a survey of the history of individualism in the Western world, and how it contrasts with the more community-minded cultures in the East.

I reached out to Storr to talk about bogus myths around self-esteem, the roots of our individualism, and what we can do to break out of our self-important bubbles.

A lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

Sean Illing

Does the West have a self-obsession problem?

Will Storr

That's a great question, and the answer is both yes and no. In the book, I argue that the West is basically an individualist culture, and that causes us all sorts of problems. On the one hand, putting all the focus on the individual as the locus of success can be a good thing because you're saying to people, "You can do anything; you can change the world on your own two feet," and that's incredibly motivating.

But this is also a bad thing because we give ourselves too much credit for

successes and too much blame for failures. The problem with individualism is that it ignores the fact that we're social creatures, that we live and survive and succeed in tribes. We call ourselves failures, we call ourselves losers, and that's the beginning of a descent into a range of dangerous mental health problems. And the truth is that our successes and our failures are the product of so many factors we don't control that it's a fantasy to believe that we alone are solely responsible for who and what we are.

"“The toxic lie that our culture gives us is that we can be anyone we want, do anything we want, but that's never been true”"

Sean Illing

Your book is really a history of the idea of individualism in the West, so how did we get this way? What is it about our culture and our history that produced this self-obsession epidemic?

Will Storr

It's a fascinating story that was mapped out in 2003 by a wonderful [psychologist named Richard Nisbett](#). He traced the beginning of Western individualism back to ancient Greece, and he attributed it to the nature of the geography, surprisingly enough.

Greece was full of separate rocky islands dotted with individual city-states. To get ahead, you couldn't be part of a big farming community or something like that; you had to hustle as an individual — fishing or foraging or making olive oil or pottery or whatever. So this created an ideal of selfhood, of the individual as the prime source of success and accomplishment. And this ideal

persisted throughout the evolution of Western culture.

Sean Illing

[Nisbett and his team](#) contrasted this kind of thinking with the psychology of Asian culture — what did they find?

Will Storr

It's quite extraordinary. They put people from the West and people from East Asia into the lab and found that their cognition still works in ways that reflect the history of their respective cultures, and that history was shaped in large part by geography. For instance, the landscape in East Asia 2,500 years ago was totally different than Greece. It was landlocked, with low mountains and undulating landscapes. To get ahead, you had to be part of a big farming community either growing wheat or rice, and you had to participate in these massive irrigation projects that were essential to group success.

Nisbett put Western people and people from East Asia in a lab and had them look at a cartoon of a fish tank, in which there was a big individualistic flashy fish at the front and lots of smaller fish around it. They tracked tiny unconscious eye movements to see what people were paying attention to. They discovered that Western people were largely focused on the big flashy fish out front and East Asian people were largely focused on the group of smaller fish around it.

Afterward, they asked people from both groups what they saw, and the Westerners said, "Oh, I saw a fish," and the East Asian people said, "I saw a fish tank," and they would describe the context. The researchers then asked them what they thought of the fish, and the Westerners would say that the big fish was obviously the leader and the East Asian people would say they felt sorry for the big fish because it had obviously been excluded from the group.

That's a long answer, but the point is really important. This tendency to focus on the self, on the individual, runs deep in our cultural history, and it's not something we can easily escape.

Sean Illing

So we've got a capitalist culture that's built on this idea of competitive individualism, and it's obviously produced a narcissism problem. The conventional view is that social media and smartphones are turning us into egomaniacs, but you seem to think that these tools are just helping us indulge tendencies that were already there.

Will Storr

That's exactly right. The selfie camera didn't create this narcissism; it simply gave us a new device to amplify it. Silicon Valley is throwing new ideas and new gadgets at us every day, and most of them fail. Ultimately, it's the people who decide which ideas work and which don't. I think technology just shows us who we are; it doesn't change who we are. I think it encourages us in certain ways, but I don't see it as the cause of anything significant.

“We give ourselves too much credit for successes and too much blame for failures”

Sean Illing

Why were you the right person to write this book? And why now?

Will Storr

The personal answer is that I'm 43, and so I was raised right in the heart of the self-esteem culture. I had a troubled childhood, I acted out at school, I

didn't go to university because I failed all my exams, I was drinking, taking drugs, all of that usual stuff, and I was in therapy from quite an early age. What everybody kept telling me over and over again was that my problem was low self-esteem, and so all I had to do was learn to love myself and everything would be better. And this is what I continued to believe until very recently.

Sean Illing

What changed?

Will Storr

I was working on a profile of this psychologist named Roy Baumeister, who sort of blew apart a lot of [our myths around self-esteem](#). It wasn't until I discovered his work that I realized everything I had been told was bullshit. I had been sold a lie, like millions of other people. I learned about this weird story involving a self-esteem task force in California in the 1980s that was largely responsible for what became the self-esteem industry.

Sean Illing

Tell me about this task force, because it's really a key plot point in this story.

Will Storr

There was this California politician named [John Vasconcellos](#), who in 1987 launched what was known as the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. He came of age during the 1960s and believed that if we could raise people's self-esteem, they would be more competitive members of the economy and they would solve all these problems and it would be like a "social vaccine."

When he launched it, it was widely mocked as a joke. People like Johnny Carson were making fun of it on late-night TV. So Vasconcellos recruited several California academics and commissioned a study to prove his ideas about self-esteem. Three years later, he announces that the data was in and he was right. Because it had the veneer of scholarship, it became a huge national story, and suddenly he was a major international star.

But it turns out [the study had all kinds of problems](#) and was full of errors. I even spoke to one of the researchers who participated in the study, and he told me that Vasconcellos knew the study was bullshit but he also knew the funding would get pulled if that got out, so he swept everything under the table and spent \$50,000 on a massive PR campaign, and it worked.

Long story short, the impact of this was huge. It spawned a whole self-esteem movement that was based on fraudulent research but nevertheless had a significant impact on how we raise our children and think about self-esteem.

“I think technology just shows us who we are; it doesn't change who we are”

Sean Illing

You talked to a lot of people over the course of this book — psychologists, philosophers, neuroscientists. What was the most important?

Will Storr

The most important thing I learned is that we are, in a very literal sense, our culture. It's a mistake to think of culture as outside us, as just one more factor in our lives. We think we have free will and decide who we are and what we believe, but it's very hard to square this with the reality of what we know

about how culture shapes our minds. The [Nisbett research](#) I mentioned earlier is a great example of what I mean here. Culture gives us our mental models, and we internalize those models and they color how we think about ourselves and the world.

Sean Illing

And it's liberating to absorb these truths?

Will Storr

Sure, I think so. For me, it was humbling to realize just how much I'm a puppet of the culture in which I grew up, how my attitudes were shaped by forces over which I had no control. I think it also makes you less likely to blame others for their faults and it actually encourages you to be more compassionate of others.

Sean Illing

What's your parting advice for readers? If not themselves, what should they spend their time thinking about? What should they actually do in the world?

Will Storr

My advice is to stop trying to change yourself, because you're pretty much stuck — and that's okay. You can improve yourself, of course, but there are limitations, and you shouldn't beat yourself up because you're not Beyoncé. The toxic lie that our culture gives us is that we can be anyone we want, do anything we want, but that's never been true.

If you want to be happy and find fulfillment, don't try to be Beyoncé or Elon Musk; instead, find the thing you're good at and become even better at it, and try to help the people around you as much as possible. It's really that simple.