



Connecting the obesity and the narcissism epidemics

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ABSTRACT

Obesity and metabolic syndromes are major threats to health in both developed and developing countries. This opinion article is a holistic attempt to understand the obesity epidemic, by connecting it to the widespread narcissism in society. The narcissism epidemic refers to an increased prevalence of status-striving individualism and a decreased sense of community, observed in Westerns populations and spreading worldwide. Based on social personality and evolutionary psychology approaches, I speculate that this rise of narcissism underlies a steep social hierarchy resulting in increase of social stress. This social stress markedly affects individuals who are sensitive to social hierarchy dominance due to their personality, yet are relegated at a lower social position. I speculate that over-eating is one major mechanism for coping with this stress, and discuss the possibility that visceral fat may constitute an adaptive behaviour to the lower social hierarchy position, which is perceived as unjust. Connecting the prevalence of obesity to the narcissism epidemic allows for a more thorough examination of factors, which contribute to obesity, which includes early difficult childhood experience, lower rank, and the overall competitive framework of the society.

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Background

The increased prevalence of obesity is one of the most striking changes in human health [1]. It impedes many progresses in public health and medicine because obesity is associated with comorbidities such as heart disease, type II diabetes, hypertension, and dyslipidemia [2]. The increase in obesity affects individuals, ethnic groups and countries in an unequal pattern. A number of hypotheses have been provided to explain this rise of obesity, such as the recent change toward a sugar and processed-foods enriched diet, a sedentary life style with reduced physical activity. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus among experts that the obesity problem is not simply a personal issue of doing too little exercise and eating too much, but a mismatch between human basic biology, which is the consequence of millions of years of evolution, and modern society. A classical explanation, referred to as the “thrifty hypothesis”, is that human history was characterized by frequent food scarcities and colonization of adversary climatic zones, and that natural selection had favored individuals who would effectively store calories in time of surplus (reviewed in [3]). Therefore, the decrease of physical activities as a consequence of technology and the concomitant increase in food availability in modern society is the alleged etiology of the obesity epidemic. Nevertheless, this theory fails to explain how lower social status individuals, or minorities, are much more affected by obesity, a phenomenon dis-

cussed below. Several other evolutionary hypotheses for the metabolic syndrome have been proposed, but none of them reach a consensus possibly due to fact that the causes are multifactorial (see [3,4] for extensive reviews).

The hypothesis

The purpose of this article is to discuss a hypothesis that views the rising prevalence of obesity as a secondary consequence of the narcissism epidemic and rooting both of them in social dominance interactions. While obesity is often associated to social stress and lower-rank position [5], hardly any studies have attempted to connect the rise of narcissism to the obesity epidemic. I speculate that obesity, and possibly many other diseases that have increased over the last three decades, are a secondary consequence of a society perceived as too competitive and stressful. This would particularly affect individuals who are sensitized by their personality to social dominance hierarchy. It is important to note that this essay does not oppose the classical obesity narrative, which involves the lack of physical exercise concomitant with the availability of processed and sugar-rich food in the modern diet. Rather our proposition is complementary, with an attempt to address why certain individuals, certain minority groups, and certain societies, as a function of their personalities, are more prone to obesity than others.

The main principles of this article are:

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- i) Human ethnic groups and individuals within a population slightly differ in their predisposition to narcissism. Narcissism could be conceptualized as a higher reactivity to social dominance hierarchy.
- ii) Societal changes have led to a rise of narcissism, notably in the US, leading to a society perceived as more unequal, materialistic, hedonistic and competitive. This rise in narcissism underlies a steep social dominance hierarchy, and is associated with an increased social stress.
- iii) Individuals, whose personalities predispose them to the social dominance hierarchy, but who are relegated to a lower position, are at higher risk for obesity because over-eating is a way to cope with social stress.

In this article, I will discuss whether over-eating and increased body weight is just a collateral consequence of the stress, or whether it could have a regulatory function, allowing individuals to re-adjust in the social hierarchy. While obesity researchers tend to examine the problem in terms of metabolism and nutrition, our essay attempts to take a broader perspective on the problem, integrating both the psychological and biological dimensions to understand obesity.

A social personality view of narcissism

Two forms of narcissism, grandiose and vulnerable

Personality traits are enduring personal characteristics that are revealed in a particular pattern of behaviour. Narcissism is a relatively stable individual feature encompassing grandiosity, self-love, a sense of specialness and inflated self-views [6,7]. Two primary forms of narcissism have been defined: grandiose and vulnerable narcissisms. The grandiose narcissist has been the focus of most studies and corresponds to the classical figure of the narcissist in the eyes of the general public. Grandiose narcissists are over-confident, extraverted, high in self-esteem, dominant, attention seeking, interpersonally skilled and charming. However, they are also aggressive, unwilling to take criticism, high in psychological entitlement and interpersonally exploitative [8]. In other words, narcissists place more value on getting ahead than getting along socially. They tend to score high on traits associated with agency such as extraversion, action, competence and power, but low on traits associated with 'communion' such as agreeableness, warmth, kindness, and affection. Narcissists strive for high status as well as leadership position, and they view their close relationships as self-enhancement mechanisms rather than partnerships. Grandiose narcissists are attracted by success and fame, and are less sensitive than others to negative social implications such as the costs for the community. Instead, they feel that they are *special* and *entitled* to certain privileges. The 'inflated self' underlines the trend of narcissistic individuals to over-value their own achievements, while subtly depreciating the contribution of others. Social personality studies have also shown that narcissism has a link with short-term seduction. Narcissists are perceived as more attractive in first acquaintance, but this positive view tends to decrease over time when the others discover that their own interests are not taken in consideration by the narcissist. According to the Big Five classification of personality, grandiose narcissism is characterized by high *extroversion* and low *agreeableness* [9]. The term 'low agreeableness' could seem surprising, as narcissists often appear charming, but this charm tends to vanish in the long term when they reveal their self-centeredness.

Like the grandiose narcissists, vulnerable narcissists are filled with grandiose dreams, specialness and entitlement, but at the same time, they feel intense shame regarding their needs and

ambitions [10]. Thus, the dominant emotion is shame rather than aggressiveness. Because of this antagonistic interaction between high expectation in life and shame, vulnerable narcissists have difficult interpersonal relationships. They are very sensitive to the opinion of others, being easily hurt or embarrassed, and can be paranoid, thinking the world is unfairly stacked against them. Using the dimensional approach, vulnerable narcissism is characterized by low agreeableness and high neuroticism. People with pronounced neuroticism are characterized by impulsivity, greater anxiety, depression, vulnerability and hostility. They are much more sensitive to social stress than other individuals.

While grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are associated with an inflated self, both forms are accompanied by a higher dependence on the regard of the others for admiration (grandiose) or acceptance (vulnerable). As described later, this higher dependence on the regard of others fits very well the notion that narcissism is intricately linked with social dominance hierarchy. Narcissism is a complex personality taxon, and those commonly called narcissists score high on several dimensions associated with narcissism. It is extremely important to note that the social-personality literature conceptualizes narcissism as a trait that is normally distributed in the population and for which there is no clear cut-off for elevated narcissism. Thus, there is no dichotomy between narcissists and non-narcissists, but individuals that differ in an indefinite variety along this trait. The psychiatric literature conceptualizes severe form of narcissism as the Narcissistic Personality Disorder. The descriptions of strong forms of narcissism have been given above to illustrate this personality, but this essay will focus on the mild, non-pathological form of narcissism, and notably on vulnerable narcissists.

Narcissism and parenting

Psychological studies have shown that narcissism is strongly influenced by the mode of parenting [11]. One theory links narcissism to excessive parental admiration and overindulgence, which leads children to believe that they are the center of the world. Narcissism associated with the child-king cult and self-focused upbringing would explain in part the recent rise of narcissism in Western societies, notably in the US [12]. Another theory views narcissism as the result of a parenting mode that is excessively guided by parental self-focus. Child narcissism develops as an adaptive response to a parenting style that uses the child as a means to satisfy the emotional needs of the parents (e.g., their ambitions). A third theory suggests that parental neglect or rejection might also lead to narcissism by creating a sense of emotional deprivation. In fact, the most severe forms of narcissism are linked to under-parenting, such as the absence of one parent, the neglect or abandonment of the child, the perception of favouritism toward another sibling. In this case, the inflated self could be seen as a desperate mechanism to attract attention from the entourage that the individual had been lacking during childhood.

It is interesting to note that narcissism is a trait that tends to show an apparent inheritance through upbringing: narcissistic parents tend to nurture narcissistic kids. For instance, adults who became narcissistic due to parental over-evaluation and indiscriminate praise will tend to inflate achievement of their own children. Similarly, adults who had a difficult childhood because their parents neglected them, will have more difficulty to establish enduring marital relationships, and might eventually abandon their own children. While social personality psychology makes a strong emphasis on parenting, the origin of different forms of narcissism might be better explained in the general evolutionary framework of parent-offspring with an important role of pre-natal and post-natal stress as mediators of these conflicts [13].

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