



Have We Reached the Limit of Individualism?



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From fake self-esteem to narcissistic leadership, we all bear the high costs of living in an “I” world.

The 19th century sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies is best remembered for the distinction he drew between two types of human groups. In the first one – called community or *Gemeinschaft* – social ties are defined on the basis of prized close relationships and the welfare of the group takes precedence over that of the individual. The second type, known as society or *Gesellschaft*, has a more impersonal nature, characterised by indirect interactions and formal roles. While *Gemeinschaft* was applied to peasant communities (families, tribes or villages), *Gesellschaft* came to represent urban, cosmopolitan environments with a more individualistic outlook.

Each orientation has its plusses and minuses. In a way, they are two sides of the same coin. The challenge is to devise a social model that finds a balance between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* and thus accommodates both individual and societal needs. However, the last century has seen a clear transition towards *Gesellschaft*, a process that has accelerated over recent decades. The focus on *what's best for the community* has morphed into *what's best for me*. Self-promotion and individuality rule the day.

Many people have experienced this transition towards *Gesellschaft* as quite detrimental. The breakdown in social ties has created feelings of emptiness and a sense of disconnection. It has bred a culture of narcissism, with its attending indifference, egotism and disrespect of others. The increasingly vitriolic tone of politics is another manifestation, as is the apparent epidemic of unethical corporate behaviour. Compassion, empathy and tolerance are in short supply.

The self-esteem movement

Rampant individualism in the **“I” world** has also changed parenting styles. Parents now place greater value on their offspring's achievements, casting civic duties far aside. This trend has been driven by studies suggesting a correlation between high self-esteem and being **successful in life**.

True, we all have an innate need for self-assurance. Helping children acquire a secure sense of self is essential for their development. What can become a problem, however, is when parents go too far in trying to bolster their children's self-esteem. Examples include:

- Showering children with effusive, unconditional praise
- Designing situations that make it impossible for their children to fail
- Sheltering them from any criticism or adverse consequences
- Fighting their children's battles for them

Parents should not insulate their children from difficult experiences if they want to facilitate their growth and resilience. What advocates of the self-esteem movement have failed to realise is that self-esteem can't be conferred on others. It is earned through overcoming adversity and taking risks. Confidence comes from competence. When children are given the opportunity to stretch themselves, they expand the sense of their own capabilities. They then feel confident to tackle the next challenge.

Social media and narcissism

Social media can accentuate the narcissistic behaviour patterns of the “I” world by enabling budding narcissists to show the world how great they are. The trouble with social networking is that nearly everyone presents unrealistic, sanitised versions of themselves. Heavy social media users compare themselves negatively to others. They over-estimate the fun others have and underestimate their own experiences. Thus, instead of feeling good about their own pursuits, they feel even worse about themselves. No wonder that many of them feel lonely, frustrated or angry after spending much time online.

The other issue is that social media make it easy for users to form superficial connections with others. Rich, community-like and family interactions are replaced with screen time. With fewer and fewer face-to-face interactions, social media addicts don’t develop the communication and empathic skills that allow them to really understand and connect with others.

A force for good

Can we establish a better balance between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*? How can societies further economic and political development whilst also preserving the qualities that make for a liveable, cohesive community? If we wish to taper the narcissistic orientation of the younger generation, one priority would be to neutralise the faulty premises of the self-esteem movement.

To instil genuine self-esteem in children, praise needs to be tied to observable behaviours and successes. There should be strong efforts to increase the amount of actual human (i.e. face-to-face) interaction that children have. Giving them the kinds of experiences needed to develop social skills such as empathy and compassion will encourage the next generation to be more civic-minded and more politically committed than is presently the case.

In organisational life, the challenge is how to make business a force for good. First, we should beware of narcissistic CEOs and senior managers. Under **narcissistic leadership**, subordinates often opt to tell higher-ups what they want to hear. They soon live in an echo chamber that promotes errant behaviour patterns and decisions, including fraudulent activities. Narcissistic leaders may profess company loyalty but, deep down, are only committed to

their own agendas, with often dire consequences for the firm and its various stakeholders.

Second, we need to devise workplaces that are humane and not Darwinian environments where everyone is out for themselves. In such companies, people have a voice, as well as ample opportunities to learn and express their creative capabilities. These kinds of organisations value a coaching culture and see leadership as a **team sport**. Shareholder value is not their exclusive rallying cry. They adopt a long-term perspective and seek to be part of a sustainable world.

Looking ahead

The common notion that the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest is beneficial for all is illusory. The “I” world brings out the worst in people. It breeds a toxic social, economic and political environment.

The ideological tensions and extreme political partisanship present in many countries also find their source in narcissism. Self-focused world leaders, interested in short-term gains, lack the empathy to view issues and situations from the perspective of others. This neglect of community results in a series of powder kegs with potentially catastrophic consequences, including the destruction of our planet.

Given the darker sides of the “I” world, it is high time to restore the balance between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. We all have a role to play in building communities in which social ties and interactions are guided by a sense of responsibility and civic duty.

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