

## FORUM

### **Unmasking the Face of Narcissism: A Prerequisite for Moral Education**

Francis J. Ryan  
*La Salle University*

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1979) observes that narcissism, as a pathological syndrome and as a cultural phenomenon, has increased dramatically in western, industrialized nations since World War II. Various institutions, including the media, government, business, advertising, and professional athletics, have contributed to the proliferation of narcissistic life plans and belief systems. Lasch contends that schooling, too, although perhaps unwittingly, has also contributed to the spread of this narcissistic perspective. Extending Lasch's analysis, I argue that values clarification exercises, self-esteem programs, and selected student-centred activities have the potential of fostering some elements of cultural narcissism in students. Such programs and activities create the potential for undermining perspective-taking and related prosocial attitudes and behaviours that comprise the bedrock of moral education. I conclude that through an analysis of narcissism in selected adolescent fiction, students can appreciate and understand how the narcissistic perspective can interfere with the development of responsible, prosocial behaviour that undergirds the formation of moral conduct and habits of mind.

Dans son ouvrage *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1979), remarque que le narcissisme, en tant que syndrome pathologique et phénomène culturel, a augmenté de manière dramatique dans nos sociétés occidentales et industrielles depuis la seconde guerre mondiale. Plusieurs institutions, en incluant les média, les gouvernements, les entreprises, les agences publicitaires et plusieurs athlètes professionnels, ont contribué à la prolifération du narcissisme à l'intérieur de parcours de vie et de systèmes de valeurs. Lasch croit que l'école aussi, même involontairement, a contribué à cette expansion du narcissisme. En poussant plus loin l'analyse de Lasch, je montre que l'exercice de la clarification des valeurs, les programmes d'estime de soi et certaines activités centrées sur l'étudiant ont tous et toutes le pouvoir d'augmenter des éléments de narcissisme culturel chez les étudiants. De tels programmes et activités peuvent miner la possibilité d'analyser avec perspective et d'adopter des attitudes et des

comportements sociaux qui constituent la base de l'éducation morale. Par l'entremise de l'analyse du narcissisme dans des travaux de fiction d'adolescents, je crois que les étudiants peuvent apprécier et comprendre q'une perspective narcissique peut nuire au développement de comportements sociaux responsables qui soutiennent la formation d'une conduite morale et d'habitudes intellectuelles saines.

"How Should We Teach Our Children About Sex?" the feature story in *Time* magazine (Gibbs, May 24, 1993) goes far beyond its title. On close examination, the central theme suggests that young people today must decide not just whether to have safe-sex or no sex; in reality, they are confronted and confused by a host of moral mixed messages and contradictions that pervade all phases of American culture, from the family and the church to the school and the government (pp. 60-66).

More than 20 years earlier, in his classic essay, "Moral Education," Bruno Bettelheim (1970) commented on many of these same contradictions and observed that up until about the middle of the 20th century, children were presented with a focused, coherent, and relatively consistent morality that was supported by the family, church, and school. Since then, the plurality of values in America has fractured this coherent moral perspective. While it may be argued that Bettelheim's assessment of the consistency of past morality is somewhat romanticised, he is nevertheless correct in noting that children since the 1960s, and especially those in schools today, are indeed confronted with moral contradictions and diversions from their parents' and grandparents' morality that are overwhelming.

One of the more strident digressions from an earlier morality based on self-denial and self-discipline, and one of the leading saboteurs of moral education in the classroom, is narcissism. In *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Christopher Lasch (1979) points out that since about the end of World War II, narcissism as a cultural phenomenon and as a pathological syndrome has increased dramatically among the western industrialized nations, and that in America today it has surfaced as one of the dominant personality types. At first, narcissism as a cultural phenomenon appeared primarily among the upper middle-class, but the phenomenon has now become ubiquitous among all socioeconomic levels of American life.

Drawing from the research and clinical experience of Heinz Kohut, Otto Kernberg, and others, Lasch contends that narcissism can best be understood as a spectrum of personality traits, beliefs, and behaviours. Some of the more pronounced narcissistic traits include an obsession with the present and with being young; a disregard for courtesy, etiquette, and traditional ritual; a need

for immediate gratification; a sense of inner emptiness and depression; fear of not being a winner; feelings of entitlement; disturbances in self-esteem; a sense of grandiosity; a need for identifying with celebrity types; an inability to mourn; hypochondria; a need for interminable psychoanalysis; the use of manipulation and deceit to control others; and an inability to make commitments and to engage in sincere, loving relationships (Lasch, 1979, pp. 71-106).

At one end of the spectrum are those persons – and these include most Americans – who display in their daily lives various patterns of innocuous narcissistic behaviours from those listed above, who function well personally and socially, and who are able to maintain stable, loving relationships. At the other end of the scale are those who suffer from pathological narcissism and who exhibit most of the traits listed above. These persons are socially and personally stilted by self-absorption and grandiosity; they cannot maintain personal commitments, and they are unable to engage in sincere loving relationships. In short, their ability to live happy, fulfilled, prosocial lives is seriously impaired, and in some cases, impossible (Lasch, 1979).

In examining the etiology of pathological narcissism, Lasch explains how changes within the structure of the modern family contribute to the rise of this more pernicious form of self-absorption (1979, pp. 294-301). Yet he also analyses how, as a cultural phenomenon, narcissistic life-plans and belief systems are encouraged by the media, advertising, business, politics, government, and professional athletics. He also argues that even schooling is contributing, although perhaps unwittingly, to the spread of cultural narcissism.

Lasch presents an account of how school practices during the 1960s and 1970s reflected, as well as abetted, the rise of the narcissistic perspective among school children. For instance, he maintains that decreased student interest in history, foreign languages, and the classics reflects student self-absorption with the present as well as an antipathy towards the past and towards cultures and languages that they consider irrelevant. The rise of electives, Lasch argues, is also a response to student disinterest in traditional subjects and to the desire of curriculum supervisors to satisfy student clamorings for more relevant material. He indicates, too, that instructional methodologies often play into student demands to be entertained, to be at the centre of attention, and to be immediately gratified. This is also extended to those techniques for teaching writing that foster creativity and self-expression and that ignore more traditional exercises in rhetoric, which require mastery of principles demanding self-discipline and structure. He concludes that the overall slippage of academic achievement throughout American education

since the 1960s derives largely from lack of self-discipline, from self-absorption, from a sense of entitlement, and from self-gratification – all part of the lifestyle of cultural narcissism.

While Lasch's indictment of schooling seems to underscore those practices found mostly in the middle and upper grades, Lilian Katz (1993) has more recently examined how narcissism, in the guise of self-esteem, has also infiltrated preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school. In "All About Me: Are We Developing Our Children's Self-Esteem or Their Narcissism?" Katz warns that "as commendable as it is for children to have high self-esteem, many of the practices advocated in pursuit of this goal may instead inadvertently develop narcissism in the form of excessive preoccupation with oneself" (p.20).

Katz's observations reinforce Lasch's general thesis regarding the ubiquitousness of narcissism in American life as well as the potential for schooling to foster narcissistic traits among young children and adolescents. Nevertheless, Lasch's thesis is not without shortcomings. His assessment of the prevalence of pathological narcissism (as opposed to cultural narcissism) throughout American society is at best attenuated (Ryan, 1985). And in his discussion of schooling, he disregards the form and function of normal adolescent narcissism. Despite these omissions, he is correct in noting that narcissism, as a cultural phenomenon, has permeated almost all phases of contemporary life. Not surprisingly, with its focus on self-absorption and self-aggrandizement and with its general disregard for others, except in mercenary contexts, cultural narcissism has become a serious obstacle to teaching values in the classroom. Consequently, teachers need to transform narcissism from being an impasse to teaching values to being a focused target of values-oriented programs and activities.

### *Narcissism and Values Clarification: Not so Strange Bed-Fellows*

A seminal difficulty in discussing programs of values education in the classroom is one of terminology. For this discussion, therefore, moral education will refer to programs designed to impart to students specific beliefs and behaviours and to utilize an approach that is usually deductive and top-down. In contrast, values education will refer to programs designed not to impart specific beliefs and behaviours, but to assist students in clarifying their own values and beliefs; the approach is generally inductive and bottom-up.

In this latter context, values education as a consciously designed program may best be understood as being directly connected to the technique of values

clarification. In “"Ethics Without Virtue: Moral Education in America," Christina Hoff Sommers (1984) points out that according to its best-known proponent, Sidney Simon, values clarification is ““based on the premise that none of us has the right set of values to pass on to other people's children.’ Its methods are meant to help students to get at ‘their own feelings, their own ideas, their own beliefs, so that the choices and decisions they make are conscious and deliberate, based on their own value system” (p. 382). Sommers then underscores the central failings of values clarification, primarily its tendency to blur distinctions between what she considers moral and immoral decisions. She argues that in these classroom exercises, “Children are queried about their views on homemade Christmas gifts, people who wear wigs, and whether or not they approve of abortion or would turn in a hit-and-run driver as if no significant differences existed among these issues” (p. 383).

As Sommers continues her critique of Simon's program, she never mentions narcissism; yet she emphasizes how self-absorption and self-gratification are at the heart of values clarification activities. She notes that Simon urges teachers not to stress fact or concept-level questions, such as those relating to the moral origins of the Bill of Rights. Instead, when

the learning of subject matter is unavoidable, Simon and his colleagues recommend that it be lifted to a higher and more urgent level where students are asked ‘you-centred’ questions, such as ‘What rights do you have in your family?’ Or, ‘Many student governments are controlled by the ‘mother country,’ i.e., the administration. Is this true in your school?’ And, ‘When was the last time you signed a petition?’ (Sommers, 1984, p. 383)

Such “you-centred” questions indeed have the potential, as Katz (1993) also warns, of engendering self-absorption and of fostering narcissism. Yet such questions are not just part of the values clarification repertoire *per se*, but are, in fact, legitimate and necessary supports for learning. As Kindsvatter, Wilen, and Ishler (1992) in *Dynamics of Effective Teaching* explain:

Linking some affective learnings with dominant cognitive learnings provides an opportunity for teachers to personalize the content for students. Learnings from the affective domain centre on students' feelings, attitudes, and values, and their internalization .... Advanced organizers are abstractions, such as concepts and generalizations, introduced by the teacher prior to the presentation of new content that help students anchor new ideas into their preexisting structures. The teacher does this by relating the concept to the students' current knowledge and experience. Once this has been accomplished, the new

content, which is an extension of the abstraction, is presented with a higher probability of being understood by the students. (pp. 89-91)

These attempts at personalizing content are undoubtedly essential for expanding student interest, for enhancing meaning, and for addressing different learning styles. But a constant emphasis on such techniques can breed self-absorption, self-aggrandizement, and self-gratification. To offset the potential for "you-centred" questions and related self-oriented strategies from fostering a narcissistic perspective on life, teachers need to implement perspective-taking exercises that focus on others, on the environment, and on the world in general.

In planning for instruction, most teachers would have little difficulty balancing inner-focused with outer-focused activities and questions. However, those required by their school districts to teach values clarification as either a separate program or as a values-strategy in English or social studies classes would be hard pressed, in most cases, not to abet self-absorption, self-aggrandizement, entitlement, and other personality traits related to cultural narcissism. This would be especially true if teachers were directed by administrators to adhere closely to the Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum (1972) original program as, for example, represented by the exercises in *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students*, which is overloaded with self-focused activities.

### *Dethroning Narcissism: Requisite Gambit in Moral Education*

Numerous public school districts continue to utilize values clarification because this approach, as Sommers (1984) notes, is "contentless." Concentrating on "learning how," not "learning that," this approach avoids the debate over which values should be taught (Sommers, 1984, p. 383). In contrast, moral education contains values, beliefs, and behaviours which are directly or indirectly imparted to students. As a result, such programs frequently prompt debate among parents, teachers, and administrators regarding the content as well as the methods of instruction.

Despite these debates, programs of moral education that are based on principles of human growth and development and on an understanding of children's moral reasoning seem to have the greatest promise of countering the influences of cultural narcissism. Thomas Lickona's (1988) recommendations for fostering character development is one such program. Based on the respective insights of Erikson, Kegan, Kohlberg, Piaget, and Selman into the development of moral reasoning, Lickona's model also acknowledges how "natural tendencies interact with and are modified by environmental influences" (p. 420). As he explains: "Television violence and

snappy put-downs, lack of discipline at home, cultural emphasis on self-centred competition, schools that fail to teach caring and cooperation – these factors and more combine to exacerbate the negative developmental tendencies of this age" (Lickona, 1988, p. 420).

His program focuses on three goals, which clearly indicate his awareness, albeit subconscious, of the influence of cultural narcissism:

To promote development away from egocentrism and excessive individualism and toward cooperative relationships and mutual respect; to foster the growth of moral agency – the capacity to think, feel, and act morally; and to develop in the classroom a moral community based on fairness, caring, and participation – such a community being a moral end in itself, as well as a support system for the character development of each individual student. (Lickona, 1988, p. 420)

In operationalizing these goals in the classroom, he recommends that each child develop the following specific qualities:

1) self-respect that derives from feelings of worth not only from competence but also from positive behaviour towards others; 2) social perspective-taking that asks how others feel and think; 3) moral reasoning about the right things to do; 4) such moral values as kindness, courtesy, trustworthiness, and responsibility; 5) the social skills and habits of cooperation; and 6) openness to the positive influences of adults. (Lickona, 1988, p. 420)

Lickona examines in detail how these specific qualities can be fostered, and he offers numerous classroom activities that are developmentally appropriate for younger children. Interestingly, his account also provides recommendations and examples that, in focusing a child's attention outward from the self, directly counter the potential for engendering narcissistic self-absorption. For instance, in analysing how children should learn to cooperate and help others, he suggests "appreciation time," which is a "short session each day when class members describe something that others have done that they appreciate" (Lickona, 1988, p.421). He adds that to build a sense of community, children might be paired and directed "to write down how you and your partner are alike and different" (p. 421).

Furthermore, in discussing collective responsibility, he asserts that we are our neighbor's keepers – that even if only one other person has a problem, that problem belongs to everybody. A new classmate who has no friends or who doesn't know how to get around school becomes a classwide concern. The stealing of one person's lunch money is an issue for the entire class. (Lickona, 1988, p. 422)

In a related context, he emphasizes the need for students to participate in decision-making; he argues that children must "participate in making rules or solving classroom conflicts; they are then held accountable for these decisions, which eventually become operative group norms" (p. 422).

These examples focus on perspective-taking skills which, in emphasizing persons, responsibilities, and even objects outside the self, tend to undercut self-absorption, self-aggrandizement, entitlement, and a disregard for rules and protocol. All of Lickona's recommendations, and there are many, cultivate prosocial habits of mind that are essentially cooperative, compassionate, fair, sincere, and responsible – all of which, in practice, would tend to undercut those elements of cultural narcissism that students may bring with them to the classroom.

Although Lickona indicates that his program of moral education is designed especially for elementary school children, there is no reason why his recommendations should not be included in the upper grades, especially where older students may have been exposed, perhaps longer and more intensively than younger children, to the forces of cultural narcissism. Yet, already touched by normal "adolescent narcissism" – with its peer group cliques and related defensive rituals that inflate and protect the ego – these adolescents may also be far along in developing what Erikson refers to as a "consolidated personality" (Damon, 1983, pp. 325-331). Reflecting the cognitive and social skills that come with formal operational thinking, they have tested and closely analysed their thoughts and experiences, and have begun to systematize these phenomena into a coherent identity. Commenting on this process, William Damon (1983) observes in *Social and Personality Development* that "the individual's sense of identity guides the individual cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally through all of life's choices that have some bearing upon what one is like. As such, identity must be composed of specifics" (p. 325).

When many of these specifics are drawn from the narcissistic menu that pervades contemporary life, they can become woven deeply into the adolescent's sense of self. Consequently, although many of Lickona's strategies may be effective in prompting the student to question some of the narcissistic traits in his or her personality – which is still quite malleable despite its incipient consolidation – these strategies should nevertheless be fortified by more direct techniques. And one of the most effective ways to confront narcissism head-on in the classroom is through analysis of literature.

### *Unmasking Narcissism in Literature*

Mary Beth Culp (1975) has demonstrated that adolescents' values, attitudes, and beliefs are influenced by the literature they read in the classroom, and that this influence endures even after they have graduated. It has also been shown that many of the classics of adolescent literature, such as Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as many of his short stories, depict narcissistic characters who, according to Culp's logic and research, would constitute yet another source for abetting the narcissistic perspective among high school students (Ryan, 1985).

Where these classic works and other contemporary samplings of adolescent fiction are in the curriculum, teachers need to discuss how narcissism can function negatively to leave the fictional characters emotionally hollow and unfulfilled, to destroy relationships between characters, and, in general, to undercut within characterization other forms of prosocial attitudes and behaviour, such as empathy, kindness, sharing, helpfulness, and cooperation. Teachers may use various approaches to analyse the negative effects of narcissism in adolescent fiction; however, they may find the deductive and inductive techniques listed below especially helpful.

### *Suggested Instructional Techniques*

#### *Deductive*

1. Teacher defines narcissism.
2. Teacher lists and discusses characteristics of narcissism.
3. Teacher guides students in identifying examples of narcissism in the literature.
4. Teacher discusses how narcissism impacts upon a narcissistic character's potential for engaging in prosocial behaviour.
5. In groups, students discuss how key scenes would change if characters were not narcissistic; students rewrite key scenes.
6. Students dramatize key scenes, caricaturing narcissistic behaviour such as grandiosity, entitlement, manipulation of others, disregard for etiquette, self-absorption, and so on.
7. For homework, students identify specific examples from the media and from advertising that foster cultural narcissism and that can compromise prosocial behaviour.

8. Students write and enact brief parodies of print advertising and TV commercials that showcase elements of the narcissistic life-plan.

### *Inductive*

1. Working in groups, students analyse characters, focusing on those that are unhappy and/or are unable to maintain sincere, lasting relationships and/or are unable to make commitments.
2. Students brainstorm and generate lists of causes for above behaviour.
3. Teacher introduces concept of narcissism; students are asked to define concept (which usually does not go beyond notions of conceitedness and grandiosity); teacher presents broader definition and introduces Lasch's thesis; student lists are compared to those characteristics identified by Lasch.
4. Using key questions, teacher guides students to see connections between narcissism and antisocial behaviour.
5. In groups, students discuss how key scenes would change if characters were not narcissistic; students rewrite scenes.
6. Students dramatize key scenes, caricaturing narcissistic behaviour such as grandiosity, entitlement, manipulation of others, disregard for etiquette, self-absorption, and so on.
7. For homework, students identify specific examples from the media and from advertising that foster narcissistic behaviour and that can compromise prosocial behaviour.
8. Students write and enact brief parodies of print advertising and TV commercials that showcase elements of the narcissistic life-plan.

In requiring written and verbal analysis, as well as hypothetical thinking and dramatized parodies, these multi-modal activities address various learning styles (Lawrence, 1991), thereby increasing the learning potential of the class. And because these activities also frame the issue of narcissism directly, they would enhance the probability of students understanding how certain narcissistic behaviours can in fact sabotage efforts at cultivating prosocial feelings, values, and behaviour.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout the *Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch (1979) examines how "the prevailing social conditions tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone" (p. 101). Moreover, his analysis

emphasizes the overall negative properties and effects of cultural narcissism. Other social critics and psychologists, however, laud the merits of *positive narcissism*, which, as Carl Goldberg (1980) points out, "is the unwillingness to be dissuaded, discouraged, or ridiculed against giving birth to the most audacious and grandiose projects. It is a commitment to passion as an enrichment of human experience" (p. 12). In elaborating on this perspective, Goldberg observes that

the importance of narcissism resides in the fact that reality – or at least the reality with which we have the means to master – is invented. There is, then, a need for creative self-investment in the world. By believing and valuing its inventions – by commitment to a perspective or a way of being – and communicating the value of its inventions to others, the Self creates a reality in which an ensemble of Selves can come together to share, encounter, and meaningfully experience together the world. (p. 13)

Most significant here is that positive narcissism ultimately extends outward from the self in positive pursuits that have the potential of benefitting the world and others. In contrast, *negative narcissism* is focused inward, and to the degree that it compromises the development of prosocial behaviour and the sentiments and values that undergird such behaviour, it needs to be challenged in the classroom.

#### REFERENCES

Bettelheim, B. (1970). Moral education. In *Five lectures on moral education* (pp. 85-107). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Culp, M. (1975). *A study of the influence of literature on attitudes, values, and behaviour of adolescents*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Florida State University.

Damon, W. (1983). *Social and personality development*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Gibbs, N. (1993, May 24). How should we teach our children about sex? *Time*, 141(21). 60-66.

Goldberg, C. (1980). *In defense of narcissism: The creative self in search of meaning*. New York: Gardner Press.

Katz, L. (1993). All about me: Are we developing our children's self-esteem or their narcissism? *American Educator*, 17(2), 18-23.

Kindsvatter, R., Wilen, W. & Ishler, M. (1992). *Dynamics of effective teaching*, (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.

Lasch, C. (1979). *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Lawrence, G. (1991). *People types & tiger stripes: A practical guide to learning styles* (2nd ed.). Gainesville, FL: Centre for Application of Psychological Types, Inc.

Lickona, T. (1988). Four strategies for fostering character development in children. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 69(6), 419-423.

Ryan, F. (1985). *Lasch and the portrayal of narcissistic personality in adolescent fiction*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Temple University.

Simon, S., Howe, L., & Kirschenbaum, H. (1972). *Values clarification: A handbook of practical strategies for teachers and students*. New York: Holt Publishing Company.

Sommers, C. (1984, Summer). Ethics without virtue: Moral education in America. *The American Scholar*, 53, 381-389.

*Francis J. Ryan*, Associate Professor of Education at La Salle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, holds a doctorate in the philosophical foundations of education from Temple University. At La Salle he teaches courses in the foundations of education, social and moral development, and methods of teaching English and social studies. His research interests include moral development and education, multicultural education, and the history of Catholic education. His recent publications have appeared in *Educational Horizons*, *Momentum*, *Studies in the Humanities*, *Vitae Scholasticae*, and *Journal of Teacher Education and Technology*.