

Response to Francis Ryan's "Unmasking the Face of Narcissism: A Prerequisite to Moral Education"

Gary de Leeuw
University of Calgary

Introduction

Ryan uses Christopher Lasch's complex conception of *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) to illuminate a serious problem in American society and a problem with implications for the schools. Ryan provides an effective summary of Lasch's often compelling hypothesis, but makes recommendations for the schools that rely too heavily on Lasch and are based on a narrow interpretation of his work. In addition, Ryan's suggestions for teaching assume an unrealistic amount of autonomy and authority for the schools and expect too much from teachers. However, in spite of these shortcomings, Ryan's paper is worthwhile because it highlights an important issue and raises questions which should be studied regarding the responsibility of the schools to engage in moral education.

A Narrow Perspective on Individualism

According to Lasch (1979), a potent and pervasive aspect of trendy modern culture markets an alluring and destructive brand of individualism – a youthful and celebrity-oriented lifestyle fostering self-gratification, self-importance, and self-entitlement on the one hand, and losses in self-esteem and self-knowledge on the other. Lasch argues that *the culture of narcissism* is based in commerce and in the media; it is deceitful, superficial, exploitative, and mercenary; its effect is to deny interpersonal and social sensitivity and responsiveness. Its victims range from those who are influenced by empty and shallow cultural influences and who become manipulative and unprincipled, to those who suffer from a pathological narcissism in which excessive self-love totally denies the capacity to recognize the feelings, needs, or rights of others. Lasch asserts that because of the culture of narcissism and the moral climate in which it thrives, today's school children are confronted with a society of overwhelming moral

contradictions and diversions. This society is one in which a set of self-absorbed "personality traits, beliefs, and behaviours" is influential and growing. Lasch explains narcissism as product of western culture broadly defined and his analysis is convincing in light of common sense. However, his analysis is restricted by a relatively narrow psychological perspective.

Ryan has also taken a narrow perspective, relying excessively on Lasch. When broader perspectives are considered the limitations of his narrow point of view become clear. The literature on individualism is extensive, and underlines the depth and vitality of this phenomenon as a both a positive and a negative force throughout the Western world. Collective writings which have examined Western and American culture from a broad vantage point include: Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) and Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Bell illuminates the economic and social imperatives which have defined American and Western individualism. Bloom highlights the history of changing moral imperatives which have led many Americans to an individualism grounded in an amoral, *soft* relativism. Further, a long-term and broadly-based account individualism is essential to an understanding of its staying power and complexity in contemporary society. Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1990) and Dupre's *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (1993) provide such perspectives. These writers take a philosophical vantage point on individualism, grounding it in a much wider package of cultural and personal attributes and in the long-term cultural history of the Western world. They explore the presuppositions on which the so called culture of narcissism is based – presuppositions which underlie, not only excessive individualism, but a broad package of orientations which promote the fragmentation of human perceptions of the world. Toulmin and Dupre have shown how the assumptions of 17th century scientific thought helped to set the stage for modern individualism.

In *The Malaise of Modernity*, Charles Taylor (1991) synthesises diverse views on the virtues and excesses of modern individualism and provides a balanced, broad, and constructive perspective that Ryan, and critics and curriculum makers in general should consider. He explains how narcissistic individualism evolved as the dark side of a flawed but promising social phenomenon – a form of individualism which seeks personal authenticity and which is widely celebrated as the finest achievement of modern civilization. Taylor states:

We live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to expose, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways their ancestors couldn't control In principle, people are no longer sacrificed

to the demands of supposedly sacred orders that transcend them. (1991, p. 2)

Taylor believes that narcissistic individualism presents a profoundly significant and difficult social problem, but he also believes it is a common mistake of critics of *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch, 1979) to condemn individualism in general rather than to recognize its valid accomplishments and promote its valid forms of expression. These forms of individualism seek authenticity in the context of social responsibility and in social dialogue, as well as through an inner search for self-knowledge.

Ryan's account of *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch, 1979) is narrow because it is restricted to a short-term American perspective. Although narcissistic orientations are probably unique in a society where materialist, populist, and libertarian views are allied with neo-conservative interests, Ryan's account shows the shortcomings of a limited historical analysis. Ryan suggests that the American culture of narcissism arose within the moral confusion and permissiveness of the latter half of the 20th century. He claims, while once most children were taught a coherent morality of self denial and discipline, since then a plurality of values has shattered this social consistency. He indicts the deteriorating structure of the modern family, the commercial and government interests which control the media, and, significantly, the schools for their contributions to the culture of narcissism. He asserts that progressive curricula in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the rise of a culture of narcissism. His argument flows along the following lines. In bowing to popular demands for more relevant and entertaining curricula, the schools replaced core courses like history and foreign language education with electives which failed to develop deep cultural awareness and appreciation. In embracing a perspective rooted in popular psychology – a perspective advocating teaching to improve self-esteem – the schools fostered excessive preoccupation with the self. Finally, in adopting the shallow philosophy and facile methodology of values clarification (Raths, Harmon & Simon, 1966) the schools encouraged, not just an individualism of self-fulfilment, but an abandonment of serious, sustained, and rigorous moral dialogue, and the ignoring of principles which can take persons beyond trivial and selfish concerns. But such an account is too simple. While many Americans may believe the story of the progressive schools as the arch-villains in the story of American moral and academic decline, the evidence for this myth is missing. Changes in American society must be traced to deeper and wider roots than these.

Ryan's account is not only narrow, it is idealized. It is based on Bettelheim's (1970) idea of an historical America – a pre-1950s WASP America which for some Americans seemed simpler and more moral than

today's America. The simpler America seemed more culturally consistent, more coherent, and more accountable. While Ryan acknowledges that Bettelheim's perspective is somewhat romanticized, he nevertheless uses it and thus implies that a general morality of self-denial, self-discipline, and social responsibility once existed. He goes on to argue that the general morality was lost and might somehow be regained. Clearly, Bettelheim's coherent and consistent morality did not exist for America's huge minorities at least, and any attempt to reconstruct it, however desirable this might seem, is unrealistic to say the least.

A Remedy for Excessive Individualism in the Schools?

The title of Ryan's paper suggests that his first remedy is to "unmask the face of narcissism," and then to make narcissism a focused target for a program in moral education. He recommends a broad program in the tradition of Kohlbergian moral education, a program based on the research of Thomas Lickona in the context of which teachers would use narcissistic characters in literature to demonstrate the dark countenance and the consequences of misguided individualism and to promote the virtues of prosocial behaviour.

Ryan assumes that the schools have the mandate to introduce a moral education program to promote prosocial behaviour. There are reasons for his assumption. First, citizenship education is a central goal for many American school systems. Second, programs in social studies have goals and teaching strategies which might readily be adapted. Third, there is a history of moral education in some American schools systems at least. Fourth, historically speaking, there has been a long-term tradition in American education of assigning social reconstruction to the schools. In this context Ryan's recommendations seem quite feasible. He assumes that a case can be made to teachers for a program to discourage self-absorbed, selfish, and antisocial behaviour. Ryan suggests flawed programs could be curtailed, existing programs could be adapted to include a greater focus upon social responsibility, and new programs introduced to "unmask" narcissistic behaviour. Presumably, he assumes that such steps could be taken without serious disruption of curriculum requirements.

However, Ryan neglects to consider whether or not the schools in isolation would have any real chance of successfully confronting so established and potent an exploitative force as the culture of narcissism. What Ryan seems to ignore is the support that narcissism receives from the vast political and economic establishments of commerce and advertising. Additionally, he neglects to consider the unquestioned presumptions upon which these establishments are founded, and he fails to examine the possible

effects upon society and the schools themselves of assuming responsibility for the melioration of a powerful cultural malady. In the past there has been no shortage of ambitious curriculum projects on which many schools have launched only to find that one or more of the following outcomes occurred: community support was lacking, public opposition was aroused, assessed learning results were disappointing, teachers were discouraged, and public credibility was lost. Important examples of programs which suffered these outcomes in the 1960s and 1970s include Rath's, Harmon & Simon's Values Clarification programs (1966) and Jerome Bruner's "Man a Course of Studies (MACOS)" programs (Maxim, 1983).

Thus there is a fundamental problem of the feasibility of school programs which seek to reconstruct some flawed dimension of society. The reason being they assume too much. Generally speaking, the problems confronted have been too broad and too deeply rooted to be remedied by action in the schools alone, and this is particularly true when such action is limited to particular changes in curriculum policies. Collective action within society is called for, in particular contextually appropriate action involving the cooperation of the school as a whole with the school community and the parents. In the case of the culture of narcissism, the effects of the peer culture and the media would have to be responded to as well, because they would seek to frustrate attempts to change such a deeply rooted dimension of the popular culture.

Further, there is a problem with Ryan's narrowly prosocial program for the remediation of narcissistic attitudes and behaviours. Ryan fails to consider the full implications for teaching of Lasch's definition of narcissism. Lasch (1979) defines cultural narcissism as a malady which assaults not just the social conscience, but it also attacks self-knowledge and self-esteem. This is an aspect of the culture of narcissism which Ryan should consider for teaching, not just by paying more attention to Lasch's definition of the concept, but by looking beyond Lasch and beyond psychological perspectives to seek alternative vantage points. For example, the sociological concepts of Berger and Luckman (1966) reinforce and extend Lasch's understanding of the culture of narcissism as an enemy of authentic individuality. It may be seen as offering superficially alluring "social scripts," and those who "act out" such scripts suffer in self-esteem and self-knowledge because they do not perceive themselves as measuring-up. If these views of the culture of narcissism are accurate, Ryan's program for the "unmasking of narcissism" should consider narcissism within the broad context of authentic individualism. Students should consider not only the virtues of socially responsible behaviour, but the virtues of authentic individuality should also be more fully explored.

Conclusion

There are reasons for accepting Ryan's central assertion that a misguided form of individualism is nurtured and exploited by a powerful culture, and there are precedents which support Ryan's conclusion that the schools should play some role in the amelioration of this problem. But Ryan's remedies suggest more questions than answers. Such questions should be examined before the schools are asked to assume responsibilities. The implications for research of Ryan's proposals are daunting, and the following list provides a sense of the size of the problem to be understood.

- Is the problem of the culture of narcissism properly understood? What useful perspectives would deeper historical, philosophical, or sociological perspectives bring?
- Is society ready to deal with the problem of the culture of narcissism? Is there even a general awareness of the problem? Is there an awareness of the cultural presuppositions which underlie the problem?
- Can the schools play an effective role in informing society about the problem? What is the proper role for the schools to play in determining policies for moral education and social construction?
- Are Ryan's suggestions for unmasking the face of narcissism useful? If among the culture of narcissism's actual effects are the weakening of self-esteem and self-knowledge, is a narrow prosocial program likely to be helpful?
- A central question for the schools to ask is how they should act in concert with society to engage the problem of excessive individualism, which is so deeply rooted in society? Further, is it possible for the schools to act without the active and informed support of a potent constituency of concerned parents and community leaders?

Such questions are worth examining because the social context raised in this paper is truly significant. To paraphrase Taylor (1991, pp. 13-23), intemperate, overindulgent individualism has contributed to a so called flattening and narrowing of contemporary existence. It has been developed at the expense of the satisfaction of an "heroic life" grounded in the satisfaction of service to others, the meaning which comes from having a strong sense of "connectedness" with others, and the feeling of having a coherent place in the "great chain of being."

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Gary de Leeuw, is an Associate Professor Emeritus, in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Calgary. He holds his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests have been in social studies and geographic education.

