

## Is Reality TV Making Narcissism the New Normal?

Susan Jeffrey | May 31, 2013

SAN FRANCISCO — A new study shows an association between reality television viewing and increased scores on scales measuring narcissistic tendencies.

Although reality TV viewership alone was not a statistically significant predictor of higher scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), trends emerged suggesting a potential relationship between narcissistic traits and types of reality TV viewership, particularly purely voyeuristic and, to some extent, skills-based shows.

"What does this mean practically, moving forward?" Audrey E. Longson, DO, a psychiatrist in private practice in Northern New Jersey/New York City, told a press conference here. "We should stop just looking at family of origin dynamic when we consider the development of narcissism or other personality issues and widen our scope to other social and environmental factors."

"It really is a 'chicken or the egg' situation," Dr. Longson told *Medscape Medical News*. "Maybe for some individuals, it is causing a problem and increasing these tendencies, but for other individuals, perhaps they already had them and they're just drawn to these sorts of shows."

She called for more study of this issue, with larger and more diverse patient populations to allow for deeper analysis and reduced bias.

"But the take-home point here is that in today's increasingly consumer-driven culture, it would be wise for all of us to just take a moment and stop and think about what we're consuming," Dr. Longson said.

The results were presented here at the American Psychiatric Association's 2013 Annual Meeting.

### Concern About Content

Dr. Longson, herself a young researcher, said she was inspired to take on this project by her younger sister. "She's 10 years younger than me, and I'm very protective. A few years back I watched her and a group of her friends, all in their late teens, viewing reality TV, and I became concerned about the content of what they were seeing," she said.

Reality stars, she said, "all share a personality trait that allows them to believe that once a week millions of viewers are going to tune in and watch them engage in everyday activities like going to the mall, having dinner with their friends. When taken to an extreme, this personality trait is known in mental health care circles as narcissism."

Narcissism is characterized by extreme egocentricity, vanity, pride, and an excessive focus on meeting one's own needs, even at the expense of others, she said.

In this study, Dr. Longson investigated the hypothesis that excessive intake of reality television may "normalize" narcissistic behaviors, and perhaps contribute to a higher prevalence of narcissistic tendencies. Although there are a lot of data characterizing narcissism and its consequences, there are few empirical data on its origin beyond family of origin dynamics, she pointed out. However, environmental influences are increasingly being studied, and reality TV is one growing factor in the environment, particularly of young people, she notes.

To undertake the study, Dr. Longson used another growing environmental factor for young people, social networking, particularly Facebook. She created a link to Survey Monkey, a third-party anonymous survey service,



from her Facebook page and the pages of several of her friends, who were then encouraged to share the link further.

Once participants clicked through to Survey Monkey, they were asked to take 3 surveys: the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), and a survey that Dr. Longson created measuring demographics and reality TV viewing patterns.

In all, 159 participants successfully completed the surveys. The responses were sent to statisticians for analysis.

"What we found was interesting," she said. "While I wasn't able to prove that reality television causes increased NPI scores, or causes more narcissism, I was able to uncover a relationship."

The NPI describes subcategories of narcissism, including power (feelings of power over others), exhibitionism, and "special person" (one feels they are more special than others). Although there was no statistically significant relationship between reality TV viewership overall and NPI score, they did see trends that suggested a relationship between certain narcissistic traits and certain types of programs.

"What I found was that viewers who focused mainly on purely voyeuristic shows, like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* or *Real Housewives of San Francisco*, those folks scored higher in power and special person, whereas viewers who watched skill-based shows like *Survivor* scored higher on exhibitionism and special person.

"Interestingly, viewers of educational shows didn't score higher on any of the subfactors, but there was a mild inverse relationship between NPI scores for narcissism and educational shows," she noted.

### **Directing or Reflecting Society?**

Asked for comment on these findings, Michael Brody, MD, an adult and child psychiatrist, chair of the Media Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, adjunct professor at the University of Maryland, in College Park, and section head of the Popular Culture Association, echoed Dr. Longson's question about causality in this situation.

"In many ways, popular culture reflects or resonates what's already in our culture," Dr. Brody told *Medscape Medical News*. "The form of entertainment is a chicken-and-egg thing — which comes first?" He compared it to the issue of violence in media. "Do people who are violent and angry seek out violent entertainment and video games? Of course. I think people who have these ideas about their self-importance and entitlement are going to be more interested in these types of shows."

He thought the use of Facebook to conduct the study was interesting but pointed out that Facebook also could be seen as a reflection of a pervasive narcissism in our society. "They don't want just to watch the stars, they want to be the stars, especially teenagers, so there's a lot of identification with these reality shows," Dr. Brody said. "There's no doubt that the audience has become the performer."

He complimented Dr. Longson on these efforts to correlate narcissism with reality television, calling it an interesting thesis, "but from my point of view, I don't know which came first."

He also applauded the American Psychiatric Association for featuring this paper. "Psychiatrists are interested in popular culture."

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