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Is MAGA Vulnerable Narcissism?

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Abstract

This is the third paper in a series applying Kohut's theory of narcissism to recent identity politics. The first part evaluated Grandiose Narcissism in seven prominent identities. The most successful identities were "Women" and "British Asian Muslims". The second part was lexicographic and considered slurs as a way of reducing the status of an out group. This third part concerns Vulnerable Narcissism in white male manual workers in two countries. In the USA

this demographic constitutes Donald Trump's core supporters and their central idea is "Make America Great Again" (MAGA). In the UK the demographic has lacked an acceptable identity, so a search was made for small outbursts of entitlement rage. Right-wing parties have been successful in the EU in 2024 and it remains to be seen whether the Reform Party in the UK meets the narcissistic need.

Keywords: Kohut, Vulnerable Narcissism, MAGA, Entitlement Rage, Invisible White Males

Introduction

This paper is one of a series that applies the psychological theory of narcissism, as developed by Heinz Kohut, to recent identity politics. In the first part of this research series Grandiose Narcissism (GN) was evaluated in seven prominent identities (Conduit, 2022a)^[3]. The second part considered slurs as a way of reducing the status of an out group and was published in a linguistics journal (Conduit, 2022b)^[4]. This third part concerns Vulnerable Narcissism (VN), which is considerably harder to detect than the grandiose variety. It looks for evidence of VN in lower class white males, in small outbursts of entitlement rage in the UK, and in Trump supporters' slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA).

Vulnerable Narcissism is apparently unrelated to Grandiose Narcissism, but are combined in the theory of Heinz Kohut (2022)^[9]. A key proposition is that the failure to achieve reflection of identity precipitates narcissistic rage. Kohut is giving a parsimonious hypothesis linking vulnerability and grandiosity. An illustration will be used for the moment. Most parents will be familiar with children's tantrums. A common example is the supermarket situation in which the child wants something, but is refused. He or she may lie on the floor, bang their head and kick out. An embarrassed parent might smack the child. A wiser parent may say "you'll make yourself sick", wait till the screaming subsides a little, then offer a handkerchief. The parent's task is to "disillusion the child gradually". The infant's role at the centre of the world has to be reduced as reality intrudes: The child has to go to school; it may have to share with siblings; parents also have needs. Skilled parenting allows the child to keep the feeling of being loved while the harsh demands of reality are introduced gradually. If the child has "unfinished business" with its caregivers, narcissistic needs persist into adult life, where narcissistic rewards are much less frequently received, and rage is unlikely to be tolerated by other adults. Teenagers who are sensitive to social exclusion were found to have higher activity in the "social pain network" of the brain during a Cyberball test (Kwon, 2023)^[10].

Psychoanalysis is not usually good at generating falsifiable hypotheses. Psychometric measures derived from Kohut's constructs may have greater validity. Narcissism measures have often been inconsistent because of the conflation of Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism (Cain and Pincus, 2008)^[1]. Therapists and diagnosticians may be more likely to see narcissistic patients when they are in a vulnerable self-state. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fifth revision (DSM5) treats Narcissism as a category, diagnosable if at least five of nine signs are present. Psychometricians approach the same issue in terms of statistical dimensions which are typically fewer. The Five Factor Narcissism Inventory (Glover *et al.*, 2011)^[7] allows VN to be separated and its components are Reactive Anger, Shame, Distrust and Need for Admiration. (The last component is also part of GN.)

Wright *et al* (2010)^[19] devised the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI), which has a higher order factor structure that conforms to the theoretical structure of pathological narcissism with one factor representing narcissistic grandiosity and the other capturing narcissistic vulnerability. The second-order factor Narcissistic Vulnerability had these first order factors: Entitlement Rage (0.85), Contingent Self-Esteem (0.81), Devaluing (0.79) and Hiding the Self (0.71). Four PNI self-statements are selected below as typifying the factors; the number in round brackets is its correlation with total VN.

[ER] "It irritates me when people don't notice how good a person I am" (0.76)

[CSE] "It's hard for me to feel good about myself unless I know other people admire me" (0.80)

[DEV] "When others don't meet my expectations, I often feel ashamed about what I wanted" (0.72)

[HS] "When others get a glimpse of my needs, I feel anxious and ashamed" (0.77).

Gender invariance is claimed, although women scored significantly higher on CSE and HS, and men scored significantly higher on EXP and GF. Acronyms are used in the text below and follow Glover and Wright in case of ambiguity.

Identity politics are now regarded by many political scientists as dominant, having replaced economic and class-based politics. They note that self-centred behaviour seems increasingly evident in public life and needs clinical consideration. Accordingly, questionnaire methods for individual narcissism in clinical contexts have been extended to study collective narcissism in electoral contexts. It may now be possible to treat Kohut's VN as having adequate test-retest and inter-rater reliability and predictive validity. If so, the justifiable criticism of psychoanalysis for post hoc explanations of everything, and therefore of nothing, will be overcome.

The next task is to define the population of subjects - white male manual workers in the UK and the USA. In principle NRS social grades C2 - D - E make up 45% of the UK population, about half of whom will be male. It is hypothesised that there is no well-validated political identity for this one person in five in the UK. Most of the historical sources of male identity - job title, breadwinner, father, pub life - are much reduced in the 21st century. From the Industrial Revolution onwards it was possible to value a man's skill by calling him "a lock-maker" or "a glass blower". In addition, some job titles conferred "dignity of risk", for example "fireman" or "miner". The valued characteristics of courage, strength and skill are now hardly found in male manual employment. There are minor exceptions. "Saving lives at sea" is a popular TV programme in the UK, which affirms the skill and courage of lifeboat personnel. Yet these are volunteers, possibly female and possibly white collar. The UK economy has declined from 44% of jobs in industry at the end of the war to only about two million manual factory jobs in England, nearly all in the Midlands. An attempt was made by the Blair government in 2002 to reorient boys to non-manual work, with some tangible results: The proportion of school-leavers with five good GCSEs increased from 35% to 45% in a few years, appropriate to an economy which is now 80% services. This upskilling was probably lost in the 2008 economic crisis. The poor career prospects of C2-D-E males were acknowledged by the House of Commons (2021)^[8] in

a report called "The forgotten: How White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it."

The breadwinner role was the second valued identity. The division of labour in a family was into a male who produced most of the cash income and a female who was the homemaker. "Breadwinner" became the major source of identity in middle life. Two world wars had the effect of bringing large numbers of women into the wage-earning economy. Employment of women continued after 1945, though at first the female contribution was often additional income ("pin money") rather than meeting the main costs of housing and energy. Manual work in the home was greatly reduced by washing machines and other labour-saving devices and the universality of gas and electricity, freeing up women for waged work.

A third source of male identity was fatherhood, which has been esteemed historically as a sign of maturity, other-centredness and self-sacrifice. A man felt it his duty to maintain a steady job to provide for wife and children. It is hardly recognised now, but estranged fathers can still be pursued for money by the Child Support Agency. The affirmation of fatherhood has been much reduced by higher divorce rates, the increased value placed on the child by the Children's Act and the disposition of legal agencies to take the viewpoint of the female partner.

Other affirmations came from pub life, perhaps including darts playing, bowls or other sports. The taboo on tobacco smoking has been one of several reasons for the decline of pub life. A fourth sport was the football team, replaced in some areas by the rugby team. Leisure pursuits such as angling, pigeon-fancying or greyhound racing also contributed. Owning a vehicle was as well as an essential utility a source of status which might increase his chances of attracting a woman.

A trawl of press reports for VN

There are frequent public expressions that suggest attempts, usually unsuccessful, to create an admired, high-status identity. A trawl of press reports of published incidents was made for possible Entitlement Rage. The search was focussed on events associated with high affirmation events on broadcast television for one of the other identities scoring at least moderately for grandiose narcissism. It had been intended to find transcribed utterances that would allow rating of CSE, DEV and HS. However, it was found that the speech of white lower-class males is hardly ever reported. The Lineker statement below is a rare exception, with two phrases - "betrayal" and "self-deprecation" - give any evidence of feelings. Therefore, any report on manual male identity has to be a narrative rather than an experiment at the present time, hopefully somewhere near as good as that of Lilla's (2018)^[12] "Once and future liberal".

Football team support may be the most enduring source of white lower-class male identity. The Euro 2020 football match was the first opportunity in 55 years for supporters to watch their national team in a final. One supporters' song about "ten German bombers" is revealing, as it reflects nostalgia for male pride from 80 years ago. It is hard to find empathic reporting of the thinking of fans. Most journalism from other countries was of the 49 arrests and the alcohol consumption, and condemnatory. One exceptional empathic report was by the journalist and former player Gary Lineker, who wrote: "Dear non-English football fans. Football's Coming Home is a fun song highlighting the lack of success

of our football team for decades. No one really thought we'd win it. I totally get why you might think it was arrogance, but it's more our self-deprecatory sense of humour." This hints at HS - Hiding the Self.

Another outcry from football supporters followed a commercial attempt to take six high-achieving English football clubs into a European Super League in April 2021. Affirmative TV coverage of named supporters is almost entirely absent. A Yougov poll sampled 1730 supporters but reported one word only - "opposed" for 79%. Chelsea Supporters' Trust said it would demand answers to the "unforgivable" proposals. "Our members and football supporters across the world have experienced the ultimate betrayal" read the group's statement. This hints at DEV - Devaluing.

It is hard to find articulate insider statements about the meaning of being a club supporter. The Football Supporters' Association (06/05/22) ^[16] skims the surface with "atmosphere groups", saying "many younger supporters form or join such groups to drive the atmosphere in our stadiums, making them the noisy and (in the nicest possible way!) intimidating venues that they should be for opposition players."

The Jane Austen £10 note campaign may be considered a paradigm of the two aspects of narcissism: Grandiose Narcissists expressed Entitlement and Need for Admiration and were rewarded. Criado Perez (2015) ^[5] speaks of "how social media helped me get Jane Austen on to £10 notes". She gained immediate access to the governor of the Bank of England who complied within a few days. Criado-Perez received an OBE and she and Stella Creasy MP received admiration in TV coverage. This provoked Entitlement Rage and Contingent Self-Esteem in Vulnerable Narcissists, but their vulnerability only increased. The protestors' numbers were probably in the tens of thousands, but their views were not reported, except that three were arrested: John Nimmo was sentenced to 8 weeks, Isabella Sorley to 12 weeks and in *R v Nunn* (2015) ^[14] the accused was imprisoned for 18 weeks.

The protestors might have said something like this "Images on banknotes are of minor interest. Jane Austen dominates the field of the romantic novel, has an enormous list of BBC TV series, and is the 77th best-known English person. We do not favour her fiction because it is about gaining access to money by marriage and her heroines apparently do not have sex. The most commonly-used banknote now has female images only – two of Austen, two of Elizabeth Windsor and one of Britannia, modelled by another feminist icon, Frances Teresa Stuart, who successfully resisted the demands of King Charles II to become his mistress. Male images have been erased from the currency, as they are from broadcast media. We protest against privileged people flaunting access to power and money by this symbolic act."

The next historical incident was the UK referendum on membership of the European Union in 2016. This elicited 17.4 million votes in favour of leaving, unleashing anger that the government of the day had not expected. The demographics of the "Leave" voters were skewed to old white working-class urban areas. The most general feeling was anger about foreigners and inability to influence the social environment. The UK did leave the EU, but it may be doubted whether the voters have increased their self-esteem. Matthew Smith (2024) ^[17] reports on the demographics of those who say they intend to vote for the Reform Party,

which is the successor to the Brexit party. These are mostly people who still believe that leaving the EU was beneficial, a much-reduced fraction of the electorate. Political discussion of Brexit has of course been extensive, but our interest is the suspicion of widespread Entitlement Rage.

New criminal charges are the next source of data. Harassment is one of the number of charges that can be used against men who behave disagreeably. The offence of "harassment" combines two unrelated senses - hurt feelings and a cavalry tactic. It was analysed as a "sexist transitive verb" in the case of *R. v Love* (Conduit, 2020) ^[2]. In that case the court separated out part of a discourse in a newly-estranged couple and ruled that the words of a man of low value caused hurt feelings in a woman of high value. In *R v Eckersley* (2021) ^[15] Judge Hilary Manley supplied military metaphors for the accused's words, telling him he was a "keyboard warrior" and his e-mails had "bombarded" Jess Phillips MP. Ofcom's principle three requires broadcasters "to ensure that material likely to encourage or incite the commission of crime or to lead to disorder is not included in TV, radio or ODPS" and to suppress reporting favourable to "crime, disorder, hatred and abuse". The last was properly defined in relation to adults and minors but has been extended to domestic arguments and other adult contexts. Ofcom does not even define it. This encourages journalists to think in terms of a "criminal class" whose views must be suppressed.

The Community Security Trust has a policy of seeking prosecutions of English people who make insulting utterances about Jews. This reflect one high status identity and a population of accused people who were mostly white manual workers, plus a few females. The CST (Feb 2018) ^[18] pursued the case of David Bitton, a 40-year-old from Altrincham. Bitton tweeted around 600 posts over the course of one weekend in May 2016. Many were directed at Greater Manchester Police with frequent pejoratives, but some mentioned Jews. He received 13 separate charges of sending racist and threatening communication. In the police interview, Bitton claimed he had only written the tweets in order to gain followers and deleted them soon after. This is a clear statement of vulnerable narcissism, with Entitlement Rage, Contingent Self-Esteem and Need for Admiration. He was jailed for four years.

UK white manual males who have low levels of affirmation may feel attracted to warrior pasts where they would have felt valued. Such pasts might include Agincourt or the Battle of Britain, but the most influential myths are from the Germanic tribes of the first millennium. These have been interpreted for us by Tolkien's novels. (Wagner used the same mythology, but he is not used as a resource because the Nazis had done that.) Published evidence for such warrior nostalgia in the UK is quite small, apart from the "ten German bombers" above.

Trump supporters in the USA

In the USA "working class" currently means those who do not hold a college degree and report annual household incomes below the median US\$60,000. This includes small business owners, white collar service workers and mostly female "pink collar" caregiving workers. Electoral demographers consistently report that strong supporters of Donald Trump may be typified as white male working class workers. This demographic used to be socialistic in thinking and voted Democrat in previous decades. This "strong

supporters” may be 20% of the electorate, to which might be added another 20% who might vote Republican in 2024. Recent migrants usually voted Democrat, but now about a third of Latinos declare a preference for Trump. They do so on the basis of the economy, probably meaning their own aspiration for high earnings.

Donald Trump himself is widely considered a successful grandiose narcissist. The most vocal statement is the book by Lee (2019)^[11] “The dangerous case of Donald Trump: 37 psychiatrists and mental health experts assess a president.” These authors say “he is the textbook perfect example of a person with an extreme Narcissistic Personality Disorder”. Our interest here is not the presidential candidate but the voters, and they were addressed by Matthew Yalch (2021)^[20] in “dimensions of pathological narcissism and intention to vote for Donald Trump”. He sampled 495 U.S. residents online using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and concluded that “antagonistic and indifferent aspects of narcissism within the fifth echelon best predicted intended voting for Trump, better than any demographic measure”. “Make America Great Again” is a key slogan of these supporters. In the absence of measures such as GDP or military power, the underlying meaning is hypothesised thus: “make us feel very positive about ourselves”.

One meme associated with Trump supporters is the Norse warrior. This nostalgic interest is graphically illustrated by Jake Angeli, AKA the “QAnon Shaman”, who went with a bare chest and a bear skin and historically inaccurate Viking horns in the Capitol invasion. There is a definite Norse warrior cultural narrative here, found online in Alt right and Stormfront.

Yggdrasil, an articulate contributor to Stormfront, gives criteria for what qualifies as a good white-nationalist film: “Positive portrayal of whites in defence against the depredations of liberalism, crime, and attack by alien races”; “Positive portrayal of heterosexual relationships and sex, marriage, procreation and child rearing”; “Portrayals of white males as intelligent, sensitive and strong – in positive leadership roles and or romantic leads”; and “Particularly intense portrayals of white female beauty, in non-degrading roles”. Disqualifying themes include homosexuality, racial mixing, negative portrayals of Christianity and portrayals of white people as inferior”. His choices include Lord of the Rings, but also themes by Jane Austen and Shakespeare and the film Notting Hill. The plot here is a diffident white male securing the love of a successful affluent woman. This hints at the large community of unsuccessful heterosexual men.

Conclusion

This comparison of the UK and the USA show similar communities of unhappy white male manual workers struggling to achieve a sense of worth. A desire to keep out “foreigners” is highly correlated with strong collective psychological ownership. This may apply also to second generation immigrants who have reduced identification with their country of origin. The absence of a well-validated identity involving courage, strength and skill has consequences. In the UK diverse events are linked by probable Entitlement Rage. This was focused for a few years on the Brexit campaign, but this has not delivered the required high self-esteem. In June 2024 in the UK the Reform Party and the former Brexit leader Nigel Farage have emerged strongly, perhaps following the success of right-leaning parties across Europe. In the USA it seems that

the enthusiasm of white male workers for a successful grandiose narcissist, shrugging off a criminal conviction of its leader and other massive setbacks, remains at the same level.

The hypothesis here is that Vulnerable Narcissism is the driver of both entitlement rage outbursts and MAGA. A prediction is that alternative sources of legitimate self esteem could replace unrealistic nostalgia for North Germanic warrior culture or imperial domination of the globe. One possible remedy is for some political parties to offer “a new deal for the working man” in a general election. A Climate Change Defence Force could be created. Civil engineering teams would routinely construct stormwater cisterns or create firebreaks in forests. They could be rapidly redeployed in emergency situations. Outsiders have watched with awe Japanese engineering teams reinstating a motorway 72 hours after an earthquake created metre-high cracks. Climate Change Defence Forces would need strength, bravery and skill. In addition, nations could promote national achievements which enhance everybody without subjugating colonised people. Golden wheat and rice, requiring advanced science, have benefitted everybody. Healthy self-esteem could be found in the universal benefits of electricity, which will be essential to reversing climate change. Solar-powered lights are much cheaper and healthier than candles and kerosene lights. Offshore wind turbines are by far the biggest alternative to fossil fuels. James Clerk Maxwell, Benjamin Franklin and Hans Christian Ørsted could be celebrated loudly across the globe.

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