Living in the "I" World

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries
INSEAD, manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu

This article explores the difference between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (a distinction originally made by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies) and suggests there has been a strong shift towards Gesellschaft—a societal model where human associations are governed by rationality and self-interest, and interactions are of a more impersonal nature. With this transition has come a rise in individualism, contributing to the emergence of the "I" society—a social entity that is characterized by conspicuous narcissistic behavior.

Characteristics of narcissistic behavior are described. Attention is given to developmental factors that augment people's insecurities. In addition, it is suggested that social media (in particular, referring to the millennial generation and beyond) have become a virtual surrogate in helping people cope with feelings of insecurity by over-publicizing themselves—a pattern that is contributing to the emergence of the "I" society. Taking an individual, organizational, and societal perspective, recommendations are made on how to prevent this trend to become more prominent.

Key words: Gemeinschaft; Gesellschaft; "I" Society; Collectivism; Individualism; Narcissism; Self-esteem movement; Social media; Millennials.

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3300601

I wonder if the course of narcissism through the ages would have been any different had Narcissus first peered into a cesspool. He probably did.

— Frank O'Hara

The family is a haven in a heartless world.

—Christopher Lasch

I don't care what you think unless it is about me.

— Kurt Cobain

In 1887, the sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies published his seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft,* in which he drew a distinction between two societal forms.[1] In Gemeinschaft—or *community*—social ties are defined on the basis of personalized social relationships, and the roles, values, and beliefs associated with these interactions. Gesellschaft—or *society*—has a more impersonal, rational nature, characterized by indirect interactions, formal roles, and generalized values and beliefs. *Gemeinschaft* is applied to peasant communities (families, tribes, or villages) within which human relationships are prized, the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual, traditional bonds of family, kinship and religion prevail, and personal relationships are defined by traditional social rules. In contrast, *Gesellschaft* is representative of an urban, cosmopolitan society with an individualistic outlook, where the

---

[1] Ferdinand Tönnies (1887). *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 8th edition, reprint 2005, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

connections are of a more impersonal, rational nature and social ties are more instrumental and superficial. In short, self-interest prevails, and efficiency and other economic and political considerations have pride of place.

In the best of all worlds, a society should embody both qualities. The challenge is to create a balance between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*—to ensure that both individual as well as societal needs are accommodated.

Collectivism versus individualism

People who live in a *Gemeinschaft* tend to have a more collective orientation, solid bonds with the people they interact with, and define themselves in terms of their interdependency—the group has priority over the self. The collective "good" plays a central role, as opposed to the good of the individual. As people have common goals and values, the aims of the individual are aligned with those of the group to which they belong. People are willing to sacrifice their own values and goals for the "greater good"—as tends to happen in agricultural communities where personal relationships, discipline and solidarity are vital to survive.

In contrast, individual interests have pride of place if a society has *Gesellschaft* characteristics*.* People and put their own ambitions before those of the group, pursue the values of their choosing, act on their own judgment, and give preference to their aspirations and desires over the interests of others. Predictably, in these societies, deep, meaningful connections are wanting.

The transition towards *Gesellschaft*

Extrapolating from Tönnies, we can see how the last century has seen a transition from *Gemeinschaft* towards *Gesellschaft*, a process that has accelerated in recent decades. The focus on what's best for the community and the family has changed—to what's best for me. In a post-industrial, digital world, there is switch towards *Gesellschaft* and the kind of individualistic behavior patterns found in more complex, technologically advanced societies, where a "survival of the fittest" mindset prevails.

The transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* has a darker side, however. It has transformed the "We" society to the "I" society; social entities where self-promotion and individuality have a central place and self-realization is pursued at all costs. Less interested in making meaningful contributions to the greater good, the "I" society is oriented towards personal success—as defined by wealth, power and status. The transformation from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* is reflected in a shift in values from collectivism to individualism, and from civic responsibility to self-gratification. With the rise of individualism and decline of social norms and structures, the family and community no longer provide the same level of support as in the past.

Ironically—and counter-intuitively—in a hyper-connected digital age, collectivism is on the wane. Strange as it may seem, social networking and collectivism diverge. Despite social media mantras about making the world more interconnected, these connections should not be mistaken for collectivism. Social media connectivity tends to be of a very superficial

nature. All too often, they simply accentuate feelings of detachment—they make people aware of their lack of real connection.

The transition to *Gesellschaft* has been detrimental for many. The breakdown of social ties leaves feelings of emptiness, a paucity of social meaning, a sense of disconnection, and moreover has accentuated a number of personality traits. The focus on individualism constitutes the building blocks of a culture of narcissism, and the indifference, egotism, disrespect and lack of consideration of others that comes with it.[2] More troublesome is that social media is sowing discord through identity politics, populism, paranoia, hatred of the press, and xenophobia. The increasingly polarized and vitriolic tone of the current body politic can be seen as a manifestation of this development. The same observation can be made about the increase in hate crimes. Furthermore, unethical corporate behavior has fanned the flames. In the "I" society, qualities that make for social connection—respect, compassion, empathy, tolerance, humility, and selflessness—seem to have gone out of the window.

The self-esteem movement

Also driving the transition are changes in parenting styles. In a *Gesellschaft* society, parents put a greater value on their youngster's individual achievements above civic duties. This particular *Weltanschauung* is very much driven by studies suggesting a correlation between high self-esteem and being successful in life.[3]

---

[2] Christopher Lasch (1991). *The Culture of Narcissism.* New York: W. W. Norton.
[3] Nathaniel Branden (2001), *The Psychology of Self-Esteem: A Revolutionary Approach to Self-Understanding that Launched a New Era in Modern Psychology.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Advocates of the self-esteem movement have a point: we all have an innate need for self-assurance and a secure sense of self—it affects the mental, spiritual, social and physical aspects of our lives. Helping children acquire a solid sense of self-esteem is essential for their development, but it becomes a problem when parents go too far. They may not realize that between "good enough" and dysfunctional parenting there is a fine line.

As the idea of self-esteem being the key to success in life has grown, parents have gone overboard to build self-confidence in their children, telling them how special and unique they are, showering them with praise, and even creating a situation where it is impossible for children to fail or be exposed to criticism or adverse consequences. They fight their children's battles, not realizing that by over-protecting them, nobody wins. They simply insulate them from the difficult experiences needed to facilitate their growth and resilience—and also sending the message that they are not able to cope on their own.

What advocates of the self-esteem movement fail to realize is that self-esteem is not conferred, nor is it a gift; it is acquired through hard work, overcoming adversity, and by taking risks. Self-esteem cannot be built on a shallow foundation of physical beauty, imagined superiority, feelings of entitlement, and unearned rewards. Confidence comes from competence. When children are given the opportunity to stretch themselves, they expand their sense of their own capabilities which makes them feel confident to tackle the next challenge. Authentic life experiences promote independent thinking, enterprise,

resilience, adaptability, making for a growth mindset. Only when children are praised for real accomplishments does it construct the foundations for genuine self-esteem.

The culture of narcissism

Interestingly enough, two converging societal shifts are underway: on one hand, the movement from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (with its focus on individualism), on the other hand, the self-esteem movement. As both movements encourage a stronger focus on the self, narcissistic behavior and the incidence of narcissistic personality disorders have increased dramatically.[4]

The handbook for psychiatrists, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition), describes narcissistic personality disorder as "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts."[5] Some of the patterns of this personality type are a grandiose sense of self-importance, a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love. Narcissists believe that they are special; have a need for excessive admiration; possess a sense of entitlement; are interpersonally exploitative; lack empathy; and are envious of others. They are arrogant, thinking of themselves as exceptionally talented, remarkable and successful. They are

---

[4] Twenge, J.M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. F, Campbell, K. and Brad J. Bushman, B. J. (2008). Egos Inflating Over Time: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, *Journal of Personality,* 76:4, 875-901; http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/.

[5] American Psychiatric Association (2013), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM V*, Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.

highly skilled at exhibiting or "posturing" high self-esteem. But behind the bravado, they are in fact insecure. Indeed, it is likely that these feelings of insecurity are what drive these people to constantly prove themselves.

Social media

Social networking sites are an ideal breeding ground for narcissistic behavior patterns and expanding the "I" society. As narcissists prefer superficial connections with other people, social networks are a godsend—the ideal medium to validate a person's existence. Digital platforms enhance self-expression, providing tools for budding narcissists to show the world how great they are. Social media have become a crutch to help people deal with personal insecurities. And like a drug, they can become addictive.

Millennials—"Generation Me"—are especially talented in using the social media. However, their attachment to these social platforms makes them vulnerable, as it can create a very insular existence. Constantly on their iPhones and iPads, they spend hours on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, or Twitter to advertise their "brand" and to boost their sense of self-esteem. Given their addictive nature, it is not surprising that many spend more time on social media than "normal" social activities such as eating, drinking, and socializing. Social networking sites provide the same kinds of "highs" as found in gambling, drinking, taking drugs, or having sex.

The trouble with social networking is that nearly everyone presents an unrealistic picture of themselves. They are an open invitation to show yourself at your best. The downside

of exhibitionism is that users often come to negatively compare themselves to others -
overestimating the fun they are having and underestimating their own experiences. As a
result, they constantly think that they are missing out on something. They don't realize
that what they are getting is a sanitized version of the generally "messy" human
experience. So, rather than feeling good, they start to feel worse about themselves. No
wonder that many social network users feel lonely, frustrated or angry after spending
much time on the web—they feel inadequate compared to their "friends."

What doesn't help (from the perspective of developing self-esteem) is that unlike in the
past much when learning was transmitted by their elders, Millennials (and beyond) are
constantly influenced and pressured by their peers. In the social networked world, they
form superficial connections with others, rather than rich, community-like or family
interactions. Since they spend so much time looking at screens—as opposed to engaging
in face-to-face interactions—they don't develop the communication and empathic skills to
understand and connect with others.

Looking ahead

So, how to create a better balance between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*? How can
societies further economic and political development whilst preserving the qualities that
makes for a livable, cohesive, self-critical community. What steps need to be taken from
an individual, organizational, and societal perspective, to create a better balance between
Gemeinschaft and *Gesellschaft*?

Starting with the individual perspective, has the rise in individualism (the move to *Gesellschaft*) meant that the community and family no longer provide as much social support as has been in the past, and has this created fertile ground for narcissism? Are social media turning into incubator centers for the creation of self-absorbed, insecure narcissists? A priority should be to neutralize some of the premises of the self-esteem movement. Parents need to instill in the younger generation genuine self-esteem, but praise needs to be tied directly to appropriate, identifiable behaviors and successes— preferably offline. Given the perils of becoming a social media addict, taking a break and having more face-to-face encounters will be beneficial. Parents and educators should make a strenuous effort to increase the amount of actual human (i.e., face-to-face) interaction that children have, to provide the experiences needed to develop essential social skills such as empathy, compassion, and consideration for others. If successfully internalized, it will make them more civic minded and more politically committed than is presently the case.

In organizational life, the challenge is how to make business a force for good. Again, ways need to be found to prevent the "I" society coming to the fore, for example, not allowing a narcissistic individual to become a CEO or occupy a senior role within the management team. Too often under narcissistic leadership, subordinates simply tell these leaders what they want to hear—hence they live in an echo chamber, making for behavior patterns and decisions that can have dire organizational consequences, including fraudulent activities. When dealing with such leaders, keep in mind that they may profess company loyalty but, deep down, are only committed to their own agenda; most decisions are determined by

self-interest rather than the interests of the organization and its various stakeholders, or those of society.

The real challenge is to create the kinds of organizations that are humane and not "Darwinian soups" (i.e. places of work where everyone is out for themselves), places where people have voice, learning opportunities to express their creative capabilities, enjoy a coaching culture where leadership is a "team sport." These kinds of organizations do not have "shareholder value" as their exclusive rallying cry. They have many stakeholders, take a long-term perspective, focus on sustainability, and seek to be part of a sustainable world.

In more than one way, narcissism is the dark side of individualism. It advocates freedom without responsibility, relationships without personal sacrifice, and a positive self-view without being grounded in reality. When it permeates a society, we create an "I" world, characterized by vanity, materialism, entitlement, and fame-seeking. It becomes a society without values or empathy, where superficial, exploitative behavior, greed, materialism, and an excessive consumer culture reign.

The pursuit of unrestrained self-interest—the belief that acting in our own self-interest will create better outcomes for all—is illusionary. "I" societies bring out the worst in people. They make for a toxic social, economic and political environment. Indeed, narcissism has contributed to a number of economic crises. The most recent global financial crises were created in part by the narcissistic behavior of investment bankers. Many of these "masters

of the universe" were driven by narcissistic overconfidence, with dire consequences for society.

Also, racial and ideological tensions and extreme political partisanship present in many countries has come about due to a culture of narcissism. Too many policy-makers are self-focused, interested in short-term gain, and lack empathy to reassess the world from other vantage points. These "I" oriented people don't seem to realize that a society driven by selfishness is a lonely place and can do significant damage to the people living in it. It is a potential powder keg that can have catastrophic consequences, with even the potential to destroy our planet.

Given the darker side of "I" societies, it is high time to restore the balance between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, so that we are able to live within communities in which social ties and interactions are guided by a sense of responsibility and civic duty, while simultaneously navigating a complex post-industrial and increasingly virtual society.