



The Entitlement Trap

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Entitlement—the belief that one deserves special treatment, privileges, or resources without merit—can strain relationships. This article explores entitlement’s psychological, social, and historical dimensions, illustrating how it traps individuals in a cycle of isolation.

Through the case of Gary, the article examines how entitlement fosters chronic dissatisfaction, weakens resilience, and fuels a mindset of perpetual victimhood. His story reflects a broader cultural trend in which consumerism and online approval reinforce unrealistic expectations of recognition and reward.

Beyond the individual, entitlement has long been embedded in societal structures. Monarchy, caste, colonial rule, and apartheid have all been used to justify privilege. Societies have historically framed superiority as a birthright, entrenching disparities that persist today. Even in modern workplaces and social dynamics, entitlement fosters unrealistic demands and resentment when expectations go unmet, creating tension between generations, social classes, and professional hierarchies.

The article categorizes entitlement into emotional, moral, social, professional, and cultural forms, demonstrating its wide-ranging effects. Whether expressed through an inflated sense of moral superiority, workplace entitlement, or consumer demands, this mindset erodes personal growth and weakens social cohesion. Addressing entitlement requires fostering self-awareness, setting firm boundaries, and cultivating gratitude. These key practices help individuals shift from entitlement to a mindset of personal responsibility.

By embracing humility, resilience, and mutual respect, both individuals and societies can move beyond entitlement toward deeper connections, greater fulfillment, and a more just and balanced world.

Keywords: Entitlement; Gratitude; Privilege; Hierarchy; Narcissism; Social Status; Self-awareness; Professional Entitlement; Moral Superiority; Historical Oppression; Consumer Culture; Resilience; Emotional Intelligence; Personal Responsibility; Humility.

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It isn't hers! It's mine: papa says everything she has is mine.
—Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights*)

Don't go around saying the world owes you a living. The world owes you nothing. It was here first.
—Mark Twain

Feeling entitled is the opposite of feeling grateful. Gratitude opens the heart, entitlement closes it.
—Paul Gibbons

Gary was difficult to be around. He always expected others to give him what he wanted. Fixated on what he lacked, he led an empty life filled with resentment. No matter how much people sacrificed for him, he showed neither appreciation nor gratitude. On the contrary, he felt like a perpetual victim.

Born into privilege, Gary's sense of entitlement turned him into a taker, not a giver. He exploited others without guilt, convinced of his right to do so. His entitlement was an addiction, reinforcing his belief in his own deservingness.

His worst behavior surfaced in the presence of service professionals. He expected special treatment, made endless demands, and grew more emboldened each time he got his way. He couldn't grasp that true power does not belittle or diminish others—it fosters harmony and shows kindness.

Social media amplified his delusions and fed his need for validation. As his online echo chamber affirmed his self-importance, his entitlement spiraled further. Worst of all, Gary couldn't see the problem. His illusion of superiority left no room for self-improvement. In time, people kept their distance, leaving him isolated—with nothing but his own inflated sense of self.

Macro patterns of entitlement

Throughout history, entitlement—the belief that some deserve special treatment or privileges—has shaped power structures, social classes, and personal status. This mindset prioritizes the needs and comforts of certain individuals at the expense of others, fostering expectations of validation and deference.

Monarchs, for example, often saw themselves as divinely chosen and used this belief to justify their privileges. This often led to oppressive policies that kept others in subjugation. Nobles, too, enjoyed advantages, such as tax exemptions, exclusive rights, and vast land ownership. Meanwhile, commoners carried the financial burden of the nobles' extravagant lifestyles.

Similarly, India's rigid caste system determined individuals' occupations, social status, and legal rights from birth. The upper castes—the Brahmins and Kshatriyas—claimed

entitlement to respect, power and resources, while the Dalits, or “untouchables,” were deemed unworthy of social inclusion or even physical contact. Despite legal prohibitions, caste-based discrimination remains an issue in India.

European colonialism and apartheid

Colonialism provides another example of macro entitlement in action. European powers justified their conquest and exploitation of Africa, Asia, and the Americas by claiming racial and cultural superiority. This belief enabled brutal regimes, forced labor, and extensive resource extraction with little regard for indigenous populations.

A more recent example is South Africa’s apartheid system, which enforced racial segregation until 1994. The members of the white minority government believed they were entitled to political dominance, economic control, and social privileges that resulted in systemic inequality.

In each case, entitlement reinforced oppression. Convinced of its superiority, the ruling class used that belief to sustain unfair advantages. Noticing these patterns is key to overcoming the lasting effects of historical privilege and discrimination.

Homo hierarchicus

Seen through an evolutionary lens, hierarchies appear to offer survival advantages. Many animal species rely on such systems to maintain order and allocate resources efficiently. Among primates, social rank determines access to food, mates, and protection. Given our genetic proximity, humans likely inherited similar tendencies.

In the Paleolithic era, hierarchical structures helped ensure survival. They streamlined decision-making, especially related to cooperation and resource distribution. Though modern society no longer depends on rigid hierarchies for survival, status-seeking behavior remains prevalent. People instinctively categorize others based on perceived power, competence, and status.

In times of uncertainty or danger, people instinctively turn to authority figures for direction, as they seek reassurance and stability. This tendency strengthens hierarchical structures, making entitlement more deeply ingrained.

Competitiveness, particularly the pursuit of status, also fuels hierarchy. Higher rank often brings better access to resources. While hierarchical structures vary across cultures—based on criteria such as age, gender, or wealth—some form of stratification exists in every human society. Entitlement, therefore, is nearly universal.

Some argue that early hunter-gatherer societies were more egalitarian. However, with the rise of agriculture and complex civilizations, hierarchy became entrenched. Some cultures emphasized achievement-based status, while others relied on birthright or tradition. Over time, social norms reinforced these structures, fostering both respect for authority and the pursuit of higher status.

Of course, humans can also display egalitarian tendencies and function without rigid hierarchies. While humans are not programmed for hierarchy, strong biological and social predispositions favor its emergence. As long as structured order remains appealing, entitlement will persist.

Forms of entitlement

In a hierarchical society, entitlement takes many forms. It depends on how individuals perceive their place and rights within a social structure. These perceptions range from subtle feelings of deservingness to overt privilege. They shape expectations in relationships, workplaces, and public life.

Emotional entitlement

Some entitlement is deeply personal, rooted in emotional expectations. Emotionally entitled individuals expect special treatment from friends, family, or partners. They believe their missteps should be overlooked while holding others to higher standards. They demand constant attention, validation, and unwavering support, regardless of how they treat others. Their concerns take precedence, while others' needs are disregarded.

This mindset also appears in those who dominate conversations or seek endless reassurance. Like Gary, they expect emotional support without offering it in return. Their lack of patience or empathy creates one-sided relationships.

Emotionally entitled individuals also struggle with boundaries, expecting others to accommodate their needs while seeing any limits as unfair or offensive. Needless to say, they can't handle criticism.

Moral entitlement

Moral entitlement manifests as a belief in one's inherent righteousness. Such individuals assume their values or way of life grant them the right to judge or control others. They impose their views on ethical, religious, or ideological matters.

Some also adopt a victimhood mindset, believing their experiences or worldview make them morally superior. They expect others to align with their sense of justice. They may demand recognition for their suffering and use their perceived moral authority to influence others.

Social entitlement

Entitlement also appears in social contexts, often shaped by socioeconomic background. Those raised with financial security, educational opportunities, or social capital may assume these privileges should continue into adulthood. They expect high status, exclusive access, and preferential treatment—and react with frustration when denied.

Conversely, economic hardship can also breed entitlement. Some believe society owes them financial support or a certain standard of living. Some may even assume they deserve wealth or financial security without needing to work for it. They may blame

external factors for setbacks and expect bailouts or assistance from family members or others.

Professional entitlement

In the workplace, entitlement surfaces when people expect promotions, raises, or benefits without merit. Some employees grow resentful when colleagues receive recognition, as they believe they deserve the same rewards no matter their effort or contribution. Younger employees, in particular, may be seen as entitled when, beyond fair wages, they demand high autonomy, complete work-life balance, and prestigious perks. While such expectations can drive workplace improvements, frustration arises when reality doesn't align with personal desires. Meanwhile, older employees may expect higher compensation strictly based on tenure rather than performance, creating tension across generations.

Cultural entitlement

Cultural entitlement occurs when individuals expect privileges based on social status, race, gender, or other identities. Some assume they deserve special treatment due to historical advantages, leading to resentment and backlash when social change challenges their position. To them, efforts toward equality feel like a personal loss rather than a push for fairness.

A specific form of cultural entitlement is consumer entitlement—something Gary exemplified. In the modern consumer culture, driven by instant gratification, many now expect perks such as immediate service and fast delivery. When denied such perks, some react with frustration, disrespect, or even hostility toward service workers. The belief that "*the customer is always right*" has been taken to extremes, fueling unreasonable demands, complaints, and negative reviews.

The search for origins

Entitlement has deep psychological, social, and cultural roots. Its foundations are often found in early childhood experiences. Parental stimulation—whether excessive, insufficient, or inconsistent—plays a crucial role in how children understand their needs, develop self-worth, and form expectations about the world around them.

When parents provide excessive attention, indulgence, or material rewards, children may develop an inflated sense of entitlement. If every whim is immediately fulfilled, they come to expect the world to cater to them. Without experiencing limits, they struggle with disappointment and believe special treatment is their right. This lack of frustration tolerance can lead to dependence on external validation to maintain self-worth. Overprotective parenting—often called *helicopter parenting*—can reinforce this sense of exceptionalism, making children believe their needs always supersede that of others. Modern parenting trends that emphasize a child's uniqueness may further amplify these feelings.

Paradoxically, under-stimulation—neglectful or inattentive parenting—can also breed entitlement. Children with unmet emotional or physical needs may develop entitlement as

a coping mechanism, believing they *deserve* extra attention, resources, or care to compensate (they believe that by asking too much, they might succeed in getting enough). In such cases, boundary management again becomes a problem. Children may struggle to develop realistic expectations of others. Feelings of inadequacy may drive them to seek constant validation, leading to overcompensation and an exaggerated sense of self-importance.

Inconsistent stimulation—where parents alternate between indulgence and neglect—can create confusion and insecurity in children, thereby also contributing to feelings of entitlement. Thus, children raised in unpredictable environments may develop heightened demands and manipulative tendencies, as they learn to secure attention or resources through coercion.

A balanced parenting approach—offering consistent love, attention, and clear boundaries—seems to be key. The challenge is striking the right balance between support and accountability to keep entitlement from taking root.

The narcissistic conundrum

Narcissism often lies at the core of entitlement. Narcissistic individuals seek to bolster their self-esteem through grandiose fantasies, exaggerated ambition, and a sense of superiority. Narcissistic entitlement can be overt or covert. Some narcissists openly demand admiration and privileges. Others subtly present themselves as victims and expect special treatment due to their “suffering.”

Entitled behaviors weaken personal and professional relationships. Narcissistic individuals set high expectations for others, often disregarding their counterparts’ emotions and boundaries. They use manipulation to get what they want, regardless of what they put in.

Narcissistically entitled individuals react strongly to perceived slights. They may display impatience, anger, or even *narcissistic rage*. Their craving for admiration fuels a constant need for validation, reinforcing their sense of superiority. Resistant to accountability, they deflect blame rather than acknowledge their flaws or mistakes. This aversion to criticism puts them at odds in environments that value equality, collaboration, or shared responsibility.

The age of entitlement

Cultural shifts are fueling entitlement in modern society. While valuing individual achievement and self-worth can be positive, entitlement can be a side effect. Consumerism, success, and individualism can lead people to believe they *deserve* certain lifestyles or privileges. In some Western cultures, this has fostered a “me-centered” mindset, where personal desires outweigh communal or relational considerations.

As seen with Gary, social media acts as a Petri dish for entitlement. In the selfie age, platforms create echo chambers that reward self-centered content. Filled with curated

versions of seemingly ideal lives, social media fuels envy and entitlement. Everyone soon believes that they, too, *deserve* recognition, luxury, and ease.

The glamorization of celebrity lifestyles fuels entitlement to wealth, status, and admiration—often without the achievements to justify it. Influencers make these privileges seem effortless, distorting expectations further. Many come to expect praise and see criticism as a personal attack.

Thus, in today's digital world, entitlement extends from workplaces to social relationships. A lack of gratitude and an exaggerated focus on personal rights over communal responsibilities are at its root.

The hazards of entitlement

One of the biggest consequences of entitlement is its impact on relationships. Lacking empathy, entitled individuals prioritize their own needs, expecting others to accommodate them—even unreasonably. They take without giving. Unsurprisingly, as Gary's case illustrates, entitlement leads to social isolation.

Ungrateful, entitled individuals fixate on what they believe they're owed. They never find contentment. They also struggle with resilience and adversity. Instead of problem-solving, they blame others or adopt a victim mentality.

Paradoxically, entitlement often stems from low self-esteem. Reliant on external validation, entitled individuals are vulnerable to criticism or setbacks. They lack emotional stability.

In the workplace, entitlement erodes the work ethic. The belief that success should come easily weakens motivation to work hard, learn, or improve. It fosters resentment toward authority. Entitled individuals tend to reject feedback, resist direction, and view criticism as a personal attack. This stunts their professional growth.

Entitlement also takes a toll on mental health. It often spirals into anxiety, frustration, or resentment, creating exhausting cycles of negativity and isolation. Linked to narcissism, it heightens the risk of depression and poor anger management.

Compromise and conflict resolution are difficult for entitled individuals. Quick to feel wronged, they become hostile, argumentative, or even aggressive. Overcoming entitlement requires self-awareness, openness to feedback, and a commitment to growth.

Addressing entitlement

While entitlement is self-destructive, humility, empathy, and gratitude build healthier relationships, greater fulfillment, and lasting success. Recognizing its drawbacks can inspire change, but entitlement goes beyond arrogance or selfishness. It often stems from deep emotional wounds and a distorted self-view. Overcoming it, whether in oneself or others, is possible with the following strategies.

- *Foster self-knowledge*

Helping individuals build emotional intelligence is key. This starts with self-reflection to understand how entitlement affects them and others and to explore its roots. They should also examine any unrealistic expectations and insecurities.

Therapy or coaching can provide personalized strategies to address entitlement. Approaches like cognitive-behavioural or psychodynamic therapy help shift entitlement-driven thinking and develop empathy.

- *Establish clear boundaries*

Managing entitled behaviour requires setting firm but respectful boundaries. Clear, consistent limits should be communicated. For example, responding to an unreasonable demand with, *"I can't accommodate that request right now,"* reinforces a boundary without conflict.

Encouraging awareness of others' perspectives also helps. Asking, *"How do you think this affects other people?"* can foster empathy. Constructive feedback, such as *"I feel like I'm expected to always say yes, and I'd like to find a better balance,"* allows entitlement to be addressed calmly.

Holding individuals accountable for their expectations and actions, while reinforcing positive behaviour with recognition or praise, promotes personal responsibility.

- *Encourage community engagement and education*

Educational and community programs that teach coping skills, self-sufficiency, and constructive responses to criticism can reduce reliance on external validation. Learning to handle setbacks and accept feedback builds resilience, countering entitlement.

Empathy grows through community involvement, which encourages consideration of others' needs. Engaging in such initiatives shifts focus from self-centred expectations to responsibility and collective well-being.

Role models who demonstrate humility, fairness, and understanding can also have a positive impact. Exposure to different perspectives reinforces the idea that privileges should not be taken for granted.

- *Cultivate gratitude*

Gratitude counteracts entitlement by shifting focus from what's lacking to what's appreciated. Encouraging individuals to recognize and value what they have, rather than fixating on what they feel they're owed, can change their perspective.

Practicing gratitude—through journaling or expressing thanks—reinforces this mindset. Over time, it fosters a more balanced and content outlook.

Entitled individuals can be difficult to deal with, but empathy, assertiveness, and clear boundaries are essential. Self-awareness plays a key role in overcoming entitlement, as does shifting from a mindset of deficiency to one of personal responsibility.

Entitlement erodes connection and fosters inequality, but embracing feedback and valuing effort can counteract its effects. Ultimately, overcoming entitlement means cultivating gratitude. With consistent self-reflection, entitlement can transform into humility and a deeper appreciation for life.