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Mental Health Professionals in the “Enhanced” Interrogation Room

by John Thomas, JB

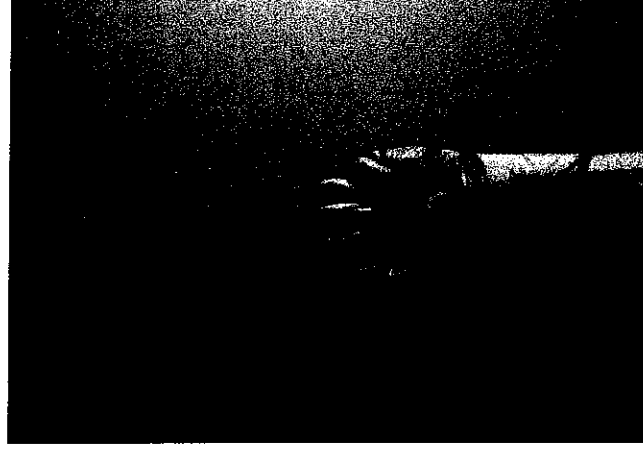
On Monday, August 24, 2009, in response to a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) released a “Top Secret,” highly redacted May 7, 2004, report, Counterterrorism Detention and Interrogation Activities (September 2001 – October 2003).¹ The report’s opening pages concede that the activity it divulges “diverges sharply from previous Agency policy and rules that govern interrogation.”

The report outlines “standard interrogation techniques” that “do not incorporate significant physical or psychological pressure,” including “isolation, sleep deprivation not to exceed 72 hours,” and “loud music or white noise.” It also outlines enhanced interrogation techniques (EITs) that “do incorporate physical or psychological pressure,” including attention grasp (slapping), walling (slamming a detainee against a wall), stress positions, sleep deprivation beyond 72 hours, and simulated drowning through “waterboarding.” The report describes this last technique in detail:

[T]he individual is bound securely to an inclined bench. . . . Water is then applied to the cloth in a controlled manner. . . . This effort produces the perception of “suffocation and incipient panic,” i.e., the perception of drowning.

In addition, the report documents the use of “Specific Unauthorized” techniques. These include

the use of a “handgun and power drill” and “mock execution[s].”



The role of health care professionals

Psychologists participated in every stage of the program’s development and implementation.²

First, they assisted in providing its legal justification. The United Nations Convention against Torture and corresponding federal statutes define torture as “an act intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering.”^{3,4} Severe mental pain or suffering is “the prolonged mental harm” caused by the “infliction or the threat of infliction of severe physical pain or suffering.” Psychologists sanctioned all utilized techniques. For example, the report observes that the CIA “informed us that your on-site psychologists, who have extensive experience with the use of waterboard in Navy training, have not encountered any significant long-term mental health consequences from its use.”

Second, those same psychologists sculpted the program’s basic structure. Initially, the CIA retained independent contractor and Air Force psychologist James Mitchell to “research and write a paper on al-Qaeda’s resistance to interrogation techniques.” Then, Mitchell paired with a Department of Defense psychologist and “developed a list of new and more aggressive EITs.”

Third, psychologists crafted individual intake evaluations that assessed mental status and forecast successful techniques. Consider, for example, the psychological profile of al-Qaeda member Abu Zubaydah. The profile observed that his strengths included “ability to focus, goal-directed discipline, intelligence, [and] emotional resilience.” The report predicted interrogation success because

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Twitter and YouTube: Unexpected Consequences of the Self-Esteem Movement?

by Lauren D. LaPorta, MD

To Americans over 30, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter are buzzwords that lack much meaning. But to those born between 1982 and 2001—often referred to as “millennials” or “Generation Y”—they

are a part of everyday life. For the uninitiated, these Web sites are used for social networking and communication. They are also places where individuals can post pictures and news about themselves and express their opinions on everything from music to movies to politics.

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Are You “Drugging” or “Medicating” Your Patients?

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Advice to DSM-V: Integrate With ICD-11

Allen Frances, MD

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Self-Esteem

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Some sites, such as YouTube, allow individuals to post videos of themselves, often creating enough "buzz" to drive hundreds and even thousands of viewers; in some instances, these videos create instant media stars—such as the Obama imitator, Iman Crosson.

The amount of content on these Web sites is overwhelming and the time Americans spend on them is on the rise. More than one-third of Internet use is devoted to social networking sites.¹ We are now collectively spending 13.9 billion minutes on Facebook, and 5 billion minutes on MySpace. Twitter grew at a rate of more than 3700% in the past year, taking up 300 million minutes of our time.²

Although baby boomers and members of "Generation X" are signing up for these sites, it is the youth market that drives their appeal. While on the surface, they are touted as venues for networking and communication, they may, ultimately, be eroding real relationships and social contacts such as e-mail, instant messaging, and "texting" have replaced cards, letters, and phone calls.

This technology may be interfering with the normal development of a generation, prolonging the "normal" narcissism of adolescence and preventing the establishment of mature relationships. Rather than learning critical lessons about emotional sensitivity to others and reciprocity in relationships, our youth are creating alternative, solipsistic realities where they are the focus of attention. Those who do not agree are simply excluded from their inner circle.³ Thus, these technological advances may be fostering a sense of isolation, alienation, and (at worst) promoting a tendency toward narcissism that may ultimately lead to an increase in violence and aggression.

A series of studies by Twenge and Campbell⁴ demonstrated that narcissists experienced more anger and aggression following perceived social

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Self-Esteem

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rejection. The narcissists' anger was not only manifested as direct aggression toward the person who slighted him or her but also as displaced aggression toward innocent third parties.⁴ It is indeed a disturbing finding, then, that more than half of teen profiles on MySpace mention risky and violent behaviors.

Even if it is just so much empty talk, the mere proliferation of these attitudes may produce desensitization. Ultimately, desensitization may encourage the acting out of these behaviors,⁵ as we have tragically seen in the case of Columbine and, more recently, the Pennsylvania health club shooting in which the perpetrator posted messages and videos on the Internet before the events.

What makes such sites appealing to "millennials"? Web pages posted on social networking sites tend to be filled with photographs and writings expressing the opinions of the individual. In some cases, they are examples of exhibitionism at its most extreme. Yet, the number of videos uploaded to YouTube and "tweets" sent on Twitter increase exponentially by the day. The prevailing assumption is that everyone has something to say that is worthy of the attention of the masses. This is a generation screaming for attention and recognition, seeking their promised "15 minutes of fame." And millennials often go to great lengths to get it, posting suggestive and downright salacious photos of themselves or uploading outrageous videos. The reward for bad behavior is, it seems, instant fame as measured by "hits," "views," and "followers."

It is no wonder, then, that the millennial generation has a reputation for being self-absorbed and narcissistic.⁶ Indeed, analyses of Web page content on social networking sites has been shown to correlate not only with self-reports of narcissism but also with the objective impressions of viewers.^{7,8} Use of sites such as Facebook are almost ubiquitous among college students and, while such widespread use suggests that it is a normal part of social interaction, the level of narcissism present indicates that, consistent with these traits, the emphasis is on quantity over quality.⁹ Not surprisingly, then, studies show that college students have increasingly endorsed narcissistic attitudes on standardized tests, such as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. Comparisons of students between 1982 and 2006 revealed that a full 30% had scored in the above

average range by the end of the study period, earning this generation the additional designation of "Generation Me."⁹ These results have been replicated in additional studies, which found that college students have steadily endorsed more narcissistic traits since 2000, making this, arguably, the most self-centered decade yet.¹⁰

These findings are not unique to cohorts of college students. Rather, they have been replicated in a nationally representative study of 35,000 Americans. Interviews conducted to determine the frequency of narcissistic traits demonstrated that only 3% of individuals over age 60 years met criteria for narcissistic personality disorder but that 9% of those in their 20s did.¹¹

If this trend continues, fueled even more by technology, the implications are disturbing. Narcissism, at its most malignant, fosters lack of empathy, poor impulse control, and frank aggression when insult or threat is perceived,³ particularly in the context of social rejection.⁴ It is the most extreme narcissistic individuals who tend to be the most dangerous. While it can be argued that any perceived increases are small, at best, they cannot be minimized. Small changes on a bell curve are most apparent, not at the average, but at the extremes. Therefore, even small increases over time will foster the development of greater numbers at the far end of the curve.¹¹

It is, therefore, imperative to understand the social and cultural underpinnings of this alarming rise in narcissistic attitudes. In 1979, Christopher Lasch¹² argued in *The Culture of Narcissism* that increasingly permissive culture eroded the superego, making it secondary to the will of the ego. The growth of capitalism after World War II encouraged a focus on immediate gratification and improved social status. After years of sacrifice and rationing, Americans embarked on a course of mass consumerism. These pursuits fostered a narcissistic mindset.

The rise of an advanced industrial culture that stressed consumerism and equated social standing with personal possessions rather than with personal achievements favored Freud's id and ego. The superego, or internalization of societal mores and restrictions, was itself becoming more permissive as society broke down one barrier after another.¹² Modesty and self-restraint took a backseat to affluence and self-indulgence.

Million and Davis¹³ identified that narcissism had gained prominence in

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the closing decades of the past century. The citizens of industrialized nations, now less preoccupied with mere survival than their Third World counterparts, were falling subject to the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Arrogance and grandiosity, once reserved only for royalty or the extremely wealthy, were now within reach of the populace at large. The United States in particular was viewed as a crucible of pathological narcissism, praising individualism and self-gratification over the needs of the community. Self-esteem was no longer derived from a sense of identification with the reputation and honor of a larger family, group, culture, or nation. Rather, the focus turned to the individual, fostering alienation over a sense of belonging and connectedness and further reinforcing narcissistic behaviors.¹³

Still other researchers point to changes in educational and parenting approaches that emphasized boosting self-esteem. The self-esteem movement began in 1969 with the publication of Nathaniel Braden's *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*.¹⁴ In this seminal work, Braden put forth the theory that the development and fostering of self-esteem was the most valuable gift that could be given to any human being. This philosophy quickly permeated the public consciousness and generated more than 15,000 scholarly articles during the next 3 decades.^{15,16}

When Baumeister and associates¹⁷ reviewed this body of work in 2003, only a small fraction of the articles were found to meet rigorous scientific criteria. By then, however, the damage had been done and these ideas had crept into the mainstream, becoming a foundation for educational systems across the country. Children were not only praised for less than noteworthy achievements, they were also shielded from any events or experiences that might be damaging to their self-esteem. Healthy competition was replaced by ribbons and prizes just for showing up. Failure was considered so potentially harmful to well-being that it had to be avoided at all costs. Doing so, we were promised, would save our children from drug abuse and criminal behavior.^{15,16,18}

It all seemed like a good idea, but we are now beginning to see the error of our ways. Not only did we not see the promised decreases in vice, we found we had created new unforeseen problems. Individuals who are

not subjected to failure and who are the recipients of constant praise without substance never learn to develop frustration tolerance. Vacuous praise discourages rather than encourages hard work and persistence. Rather than responding to disappointment and failure with increased effort, individuals who are indiscriminately praised more often opt to simply give up.¹⁵

Indeed, intermittent reinforcement is critical to the development of persistence and frustration tolerance and may be necessary for the proper development of brain circuits in the orbital and medial prefrontal cortex.¹⁹ These tenets are familiar to learning theorists who have understood for decades that intermittent reward reinforces behavior and is at the root of the addictive behavior of gambling.²⁰

Indeed, Twitter has been described by some as an almost perfect model of intermittent variable reward,²¹ making it as potentially addictive as games of chance. Susan A. Greenfield, baroness and professor of synaptic pharmacology at Oxford University, has argued that social networking sites lead to a compulsion in seeking immediate reward that may be linked to the same brain pathways activated in drug addiction. Since gratification is being derived from interaction with a computer screen rather than face-to-face with another human being, the real social nature of the interaction becomes diminished and the pleasurable feelings generated are solipsistic, lacking in any concern for mutual gratification. Thus, rather than being an aid to social contact and interaction, such sites actually lead to an erosion of empathy and the creation of more alienation.²²

While the self-esteem movement has been largely debunked, we are just now reaping what it has sown. The generation raised under these conditions is entering the workforce and has been described as difficult and that their expectations far exceed those of their predecessors in entry level positions. The praise they have been given all of their lives is still expected, even if they have not done anything to earn it, and they lack the resiliency to deal with real disappointment and the realities of life.^{23,24}

It should come as no surprise, then, that survivors of this largely failed social experiment have turned to other outlets to seek the praise to which they have grown so accustomed. Their choices, however, may not be improving their lot. By investing in virtual relationships in cyberspace rather than in the real world, they may be continuing a vicious

cycle of empty praise, disingenuousness, and superficiality. The computer screen lacks the nuances of interpersonal interaction but may lead to a false belief that the human needs for love, friendship, and intimacy have been met.

Even the meaning of friendship has dramatically changed in the digital age. The number of people that you can count as friends on these sites contributes to individual status and engenders a sense of importance. Relationships are not valued for their own sake but, rather, in bulk. Friends are "collected" and displayed on Web pages for all the world to see and admire.²⁵

Despite the ultimate hollowness of these relationships, the false belief that one is accepted and important to others frees the individual to pursue more egocentric needs, further driving narcissism. It is feared that Web pages created on social networking sites will continue to promote and showcase the inflated self-esteem of millennials. And their influence may have increasingly far-reaching consequences: employers commonly search personal Web page postings of potential employees²⁶ and many not only encourage but require their workers to maintain such sites as online marketing strategies.²⁷

The rise of social networking sites is indeed a disturbing trend that may be continuing to fuel the narcissism of a generation becoming more desperate than ever to maintain their fragile self-esteem. By investing more and more time and energy in a virtual world where they can maintain their sense of importance and specialness, they risk even more disappointment when confronted with the harsh realities of life. Relationships become shallower and more fleeting; self-interest exceeds the common good. The costs of narcissism, then, are paid by the society at large.⁹ And since millennials equate their very existence with their self-image, they may react aggressively to protect it. Anything that threatens their ability to maintain their false sense of self is considered a threat to life itself. As such, the dangerousness of the millennial generation may yet be actualized.

Dr LaPorta is chairman of the department of psychiatry at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson, NJ.

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