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Empathy, narcissism, and visual arts engagement

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Abstract: Empathy involves imagining others' minds and feeling compassion for them, and narcissism is a sense of inflated self-esteem with a low regard for others. In this chapter, I will review scientific research on empathy, narcissism, and visual arts, including creativity. I will present evidence that there are two paths to arts engagement, just as with any behavior. Some people likely get involved with the arts because they care about others and want to improve the world in some way, and some people get involved for more self-focused reasons. The final section will make recommendations for future research and for how these ideas can be applied to museum settings.

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Definitions and background

Empathy involves imagining what the world is like for others (cognitive empathy, sometimes called perspective taking) and feeling care and compassion for them (emotional empathy, sometimes called empathic concern).¹ It inspires people to help others and to avoid harming them.^{2,3} Empathy is most commonly measured using self-report personality scales, for example, by asking people how much they agree with statements like *“I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.”*¹

Narcissism involves having a sense of inflated self-esteem along with a disinterest in other people as anything other than sources of attention and admiration.⁴ Not surprisingly, narcissistic people tend to score low on empathy.^{5,6} Narcissistic people are sensitive to negative feedback from others, and react aggressively in the face of criticism.⁷ Narcissism is also measured using self-report personality scales, for example, *“I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve.”*⁴

Research has found that empathy has been declining over time in the United States since the late 1970s,⁸ and narcissism has been rising since the early 1980s.^{9,10} At the same time, there have been declines in several types of social participation, such as getting together with neighbors, coworkers, and group members,¹¹ religious attendance,¹² and museum attendance.^{13,14} Museums should consider these cultural trends in light of the research presented below on empathy, narcissism, and visual arts engagement.

Two paths to arts engagement

People engage in the same behaviors for different reasons. For example, we cannot assume that people who volunteer their time or donate money to nonprofit organizations are altruistic, just because the acts themselves are desirable. Research finds that some people donate time and money because they care about others and want to help (other-oriented motivation), and others do this because they want to look good, feel good, or receive something in return (self-focused motivation).¹⁵⁻¹⁷ This is found even for skills like emotion recognition—both empathic and narcissistic people are good at it, but likely for different reasons.¹⁸

In this chapter, I will present evidence that there are these two paths to arts engagement, just as with any behavior. On the one hand, some people likely get involved with the arts because they care about others and want to improve the world in some way. An example of this type of thinking is from Leo Tolstoy’s 1897 essay, “What is art?” He wrote: *“The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one’s neighbor, now attained only by the best members of society, the customary feeling and the instinct of all men.”*¹⁹ Over a century later, writer Susan Vreeland eloquently expanded on these ideas, saying: *“Paintings allow us to live beyond our own time and place. Each time we enter imaginatively into the life of another, it’s a small step upwards in the elevation of the human race. When there is no imagination of others’ lives, there is no human connection, and therefore no compassion. Without compassion, then community, commitment, lovingkindness, human understanding, peace—all shrivel. Individuals become isolated, the isolated can turn cruel, and the tragic hovers. Art—and literature—are antidotes to that.”*²⁰

On the other hand, some people likely get involved in the arts for more self-focused reasons. Among other self-focused purposes, engaging as a consumer of art can help to signal one’s superiority from others via one’s cultured tastes.^{21,22} When it comes to creating art, there is a common cultural belief that artists must be self-focused in order to believe that they have anything important to say. And there are strong cultural archetypes of the selfish artist, who thrives in isolation and must reach deeply within to spin the yarn of her brilliant self into the gold of solo shows. Writer Sylvia Plath commented on this, saying that: *“I think writers and artists are the most narcissistic people.”*²³ During an interview, visual artist Damien Hirst, who created a 2007 piece called “Narcissistic Love” in the midst of increasing narcissism in the United States, observed that *“You need a big ego to be an artist.”*²⁴

Empathy, narcissism, and creativity

Creativity can be measured using self-report scales that ask people how creative they think they are. At the same time, there are two other ways of measuring it that are more objective: by asking other

people how creative another person is, and by using a standardized test of creative thinking. There are several different standardized tests, but most ask people to come up with an idea and then have judges count the number of ideas and rate the originality of them. An example is the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, which asks people to draw a detailed figure from a simple one (e.g. a jellybean shape) or to come up with different uses for everyday objects such as cans and books.²⁵ These tests are associated with real-world creative outcomes up to 50 years later.²⁶ Research has found that there have been declines over time on scores of creative thinking in the United States, especially among young children.²⁷⁻²⁹

Most studies of empathy and creativity have found positive links between them. Empathic people see themselves as creative,³⁰⁻³² others agree that they are creative,³³ and they also score higher on objective tests of creative thinking.^{34, 35} However, one study found that more creative people had lower altruism scores than less creative people.³⁶

Studies of narcissism and creativity are more complex. Narcissistic people also see themselves as creative,³⁷⁻⁴⁰ and others sometimes agree that they are creative, but only when under the sway of their charisma.^{41, 42} As for actual creative thinking performance on objective tasks, narcissistic people perform no better than others,^{41, 43, 44} and at times they even perform worse.^{44, 45} Yet, they can do well on creative thinking tests if others are watching them and they can show off.⁴⁶

Nearly all studies on this topic are correlational, which means that it's impossible to know whether higher empathy leads to a creativity boost, whether higher creativity helps people to become more empathic, or whether there is some other unknown explanation. However, studies have found that being temporarily placed in a state of either higher prosocial motivation *or* higher entitlement (a type of narcissism) can cause more creative thinking.^{33, 45} Another study found that creativity training caused an increase in empathy.⁴⁷ I know of no studies that examine whether creativity training can lead to higher narcissism.

Arts consumption and creation

Arts consumption includes having a high interest in art, collecting art works, and attending art museums, whereas arts creation includes taking art classes and directly creating art works. Of course, there are overlaps between the two, and many people do both. However, we organize the current research literature around these two types of engagements. Overall, there are not many studies on the topic of empathy or narcissism and visual arts engagement specifically. But there are more studies when considering other types of arts (e.g. performing arts, literature).⁴⁸

Empathy, narcissism, and arts consumption

Our emerging research is finding that people who consume visual art score higher on prosocial traits like empathy, and prosocial behaviors like volunteering and charitable giving.⁴⁹ Importantly, these effects are not explained by differences in education, income, political affiliation, or personality. Our other emerging research is finding that people who are more communally-focused (i.e. caring, want to help) have a higher interest in visual art and are more likely to attend art galleries.⁵⁰ This is correlational research, which means that we do not know the direction of causality: it's possible that being more prosocial causes increased arts participation, but it's also possible that increased arts participation makes people more prosocial. Experimental studies can help to determine the causal direction, but these are rare, with mixed results so far. In addition, these studies have only examined the effects of visual arts exposure on empathy-related outcomes, and not the other way around. Two studies have found that being exposed to visual arts had no effects on the empathy levels of health / medical students.^{51, 52} Yet one study found that children who were given a guided museum tour had higher empathy compared to those who were not.⁵³

What about narcissism and arts consumption? It is very difficult to find research on this topic, however, some research has found that more narcissistic people are interested in jobs that are more artistic and cultured.⁵⁴ In addition, our emerging research is finding that more narcissistic people also have a higher interest in visual art and are more likely to attend art galleries.⁵⁰ We are also finding that more narcissistic people prefer more abstract art, rather than more representational art.⁵⁰

Empathy, narcissism, and arts creation

There are inconsistent effects of creating visual art on empathy-related outcomes, which include prosocial behaviors like helping or sharing with others, and theory of mind, an understanding of others' desires and intentions. Our emerging research is finding that people who create visual art score higher on prosocial traits like empathy and prosocial behaviors like volunteering and charitable giving.⁴⁹ Again, these effects are not explained by differences in education, income, political affiliation, or personality. Our other emerging research is finding that people who are communally-focused (i.e. caring, want to help) are more likely to take art classes.⁵⁰ Yet these studies are again correlational, which means that we do not know the direction of causality. Again, longitudinal and experimental research is rare, and it has only examined the effects of visual arts creation on empathy-related outcomes, and not the other way around. Two studies have found no effects of art classes on empathy,^{55, 56} and one study has found no effects on prosocial behavior.⁵⁷ Another paper has found inconsistent results on theory of mind.⁵⁶

What about narcissism and making art? Research on this topic is virtually non-existent, however, one study found that more narcissistic young people were *less* likely to say that they wanted to create artistic works as one of their life goals.⁵⁸ Yet, our emerging research is finding that more narcissistic people are more likely to take art classes.⁵⁰ Thus, there are inconsistent findings on the topic of narcissism and arts creation.

What about people who devote their lives to creating visual art? There are a few studies that compare artists versus non-artists on personality traits relevant to empathy and narcissism. One study compared visual artists to members of the general population and found that artists scored higher on emotional sensitivity.⁵⁹ Yet emotional sensitivity is not the same as empathy; it could mean sensitivity for one's own emotions, and not necessarily others'. Other studies found no differences in sensitivity, but found that artists were more aloof, aggressive, and self-sufficient compared to the general population.⁶⁰⁻⁶² This suggests that professional artists may have some narcissistic tendencies. More evidence for this comes from a study that found that artists scored higher than non-artists on psychoticism, which is a personality trait characterized by being solitary, insensitive, low in empathy, and hostile.⁶³ Yet, another study found that artists scored higher on *both* emotional sensitivity and dominance, a rare pattern that could signal both high empathy and high narcissism within the same individuals.⁶⁴ Future research should directly measure empathy and narcissism in artists and non-artists, using modern, standardized scales. In addition, future research should examine whether certain types of artists (e.g. sculptors) score differently than other types of artists (e.g. oil painters, conceptual artists) on measures of empathy and narcissism.

Summary of results and implications for museums

Taken together, although there are only a few studies on this topic so far, and some are unpublished, it looks like there may be two paths to arts consumption and creation: one that is more focused on others, and one that is more focused on the self. Museums should be aware of these different audiences and pay attention to their different motivations for attending art museums. Although obviously museums need to market toward all groups, it is important to not only focus on the more narcissistic museum-goers. It might be tempting to do this, when considering changes over time in empathy and narcissism,⁶⁵ however, this strategy could backfire, because narcissistic people only give when something is in it for themselves.^{66, 67} This suggests that they would be less engaged than more empathic people, whether as visitors, volunteers, or donors.

For now, although research suggests that these two paths exist, the causal direction is not clear. Most of the existing research is correlational, and the few longitudinal or experimental studies have mixed results. Future research needs to directly examine how consuming or creating art affects empathy and narcissism. It also needs to examine the opposite direction—how increasing empathy or narcissism affects people's interest in art and their creative thinking skills.

The mixed results in the longitudinal and experimental studies suggest that we should not assume that exposure to visual arts necessarily leads to increased empathy, even though the results are more predictable in some other arts domains, like theater.^{56, 68-70} Future research needs to examine which practices are most effective when it comes to increasing empathy via artworks. We cannot assume that

visual art in itself will inherently elicit empathy, but there are likely certain people who will be more responsive than others, certain types of artworks that are more likely to elicit empathy than others (e.g. figural versus abstract), and certain practices that will can make people engage more empathically (e.g. certain instructions; for a deeper discussion, see ⁷¹).

Is empathy something that can be taught and learned? Although empathy is partially genetic, meaning that some people are born with more social and emotional sensitivity than others,⁷²⁻⁷⁴ there are many different techniques that can help to increase empathy in people of all ages.

There is no reason to expect that traditional museum practices such as memorizing information about artworks (e.g. year, artistic period), focusing on principles of design (e.g. color, line, balance), or focusing on technical aspects of artworks (e.g. medium, techniques used) should have any influence on viewers' empathy. Yet, museums can make small changes that could potentially impact viewers' empathy. These changes involve thinking from a people-centered perspective: all artworks in museums are made by people, curated by people, taught by people, and viewed by people.

First, museums should think about how they can involve artists. After all, museums could not exist without artists, and one key principle of empathic design is to involve all stakeholders in decision-making processes. One way to involve artists might be to invite them to speak about the meaning of their artworks displayed in the museum. But of course, a lot of the work in museums was made by deceased, unknown, physically distant, or otherwise inaccessible artists. This is why I recommend that museums start collaborating with local artists, who can offer interesting perspectives from their own practice that can be paired with related exhibitions or specific artworks. Involving local artists would be mutually beneficial, since amidst decreasing levels of museum attendance, there has been an increasing interest in making art among young Americans since the 1990s.⁷⁵ This suggests that young adult audiences would be engaged by learning about how artists work and having the opportunity to try out techniques for themselves.

In addition to revealing the inner workings of artists' minds, another people-centered approach focuses on the museum staff themselves, such as curators, teachers, docents, and other staff members. The first question to ask is whether these staff members (including members of the board and leaders of the organization) reflect the population, and especially with respect to women and people of color. Some resources to start are Ithaka SR's Case Studies in Museum Diversity (sr.ithaka.org/landing/case-studies-in-museum-diversity) and the Museums as a Site for Social Action Project (www.museumaction.org). Next, I recommend prioritizing empathic communication in staff training exercises, so that staff at all levels have the skills to treat their coworkers and members of the public with sensitivity and respect.

As for the viewers of art, again, my first recommendation is to examine whether museum visitors represent the population, and if not, to try to better understand barriers to museum attendance. Although we might assume that the top barriers to attendance are related to practical considerations like money and time, a recent national survey found that the number one reason that people gave for not attending art museums within the past year was because "it's not for someone like me."⁷⁶ Nearly half (46%) of non-attendees gave this reason, and only 16% listed inconvenience (distance, hours) and 10% listed cost as their main barrier.

I end with some specific, evidence-based, suggestions for how to use the artworks themselves to increase empathy in museum visitors. I strongly recommend working with social scientists, if possible, in order to help with evaluation and assessment of empathy-building activities, and to make sure that they don't backfire. Activities could backfire if, for example, museums are working with incorrect definitions of empathy.⁷⁷ Some people define empathy as "putting oneself in someone else's shoes." For example, for a photograph of a person who is dying of AIDS, a well-meaning museum might ask viewers to imagine what it would be like for them to be the person in the photograph. The problem with this "self-in-other" definition is that when people imagine themselves in some sort of difficult situation, they tend to feel overwhelmed and then want to avoid the situation.⁷⁸ Not only does this lead to more distress, but it also makes people less likely to help. Instead, one recommended practice is to ask viewers to imagine what the *other person* is thinking and feeling, and what the world is like from *his or her* perspective.

Another practice that can help to increase empathy is to focus on similarities between oneself and others.^{79, 80} The practice of focusing on a “common humanity” can be especially powerful, and some research suggests that this way of thinking helped to explain the behavior of rescuers during the Holocaust.⁸¹

Active listening is another critical practice to increase empathy.⁸² It involves listening to others’ experiences without judgment and reflecting back on what they are saying to make sure they feel understood. The goal is simply to hear and understand the other person, without giving advice or opinions. One way to increase active listening among museum visitors may be to pair an artwork with a local community member who is somehow related to this piece of art. For example, museums could invite a local veteran to describe her experience and compare it to an image of or relic from a war scene. The audience could then ask the speaker questions to get a better understanding of her experience.

Empathy could also be increased by asking visitors to pay attention to emotional signals of all sorts,^{83, 84} not just in facial expressions and body language in figural artworks, but also to how colors, lines, titles, and the use of other techniques might convey emotion. Some museums are already using exercises that are designed to focus the viewers’ attention to emotional aspects. For example, a program at Austin’s Blanton Museum of Art asks medical students to “*Find a work of art that you might choose to share with a depressed friend. Imagine their reactions.*” among other exercises.⁸⁵ Importantly, this program also allows students a chance to discuss their choices in a small, guided group.

These are just a few ways that museums might integrate empathy-building exercises within museum settings, and it would be helpful for museums to gather and share their activities with each other so that museums can be part of the rebuilding of empathy in society.

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