

McDonald, M., Wearing, S. L., & Ponting, J. (2008) Narcissism and Neo-Liberalism: Work, Leisure and Alienation in an Era of Consumption. *Loisir et Societe / Society and Leisure*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 489 – 510.

Narcissism and neo-liberalism: Work, leisure, and alienation in an era of consumption

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to trace some of the links between neo-liberalism, narcissism and the influence of work, leisure and consumer culture on self-identity. By examining narcissism as an instrument of personality and social psychological analysis, we investigate the ways in which self-identity in neo-liberal societies is constructed and fulfilled through interactions with the marketplace, promoting self-interest and success in the form of wealth, admiration and bodily perfection. It is our contention that this process creates narcissistic identities, which attempt to defend the self against the degradation of work in neo-liberal societies, and where anxiety, emptiness and isolation are converted into pleasure and healing through leisure consumerism. In the final analysis we explore some of the links between narcissistic work and leisure, and psychological distress and disorders.

Keywords: narcissism, neo-liberalism, work, leisure, consumption, psychological distress and disorder.

Introduction

Market fundamentalism can be considered the current economic paradigm. Even when it's not being applied in its pure form of a totally unregulated market, it still constitutes the ideal against which most Western governments construct their economic policy, and it's certainly the model employed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in their dealings with the world's nation states. Its impact on current global politics is immense and, many would argue, largely negative. (Sim, 2004, p. 102)

Neo-liberal ideologies regard people as 'consumers' rather than 'producers', representing a shift in the mode of contemporary citizenship, and the axis upon which identity is constructed in free market societies (Beder, 2001; Birch & Paul, 2003; Cohen, 2003; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Featherstone, 2007; Hamilton, 2002, 2003; Kasser, 2003; Lury, 1996; Slater, 1997). As an ideology we contend that neo-liberal economic, social and political relations, has led to a distinct form of alienation that we conceptualize as narcissism. Narcissism offers an interpretation of alienation from the defining characteristics of neo-liberal free market societies – individualism and consumerism (Bourdieu, 1998; Chomsky, 1999; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Deery & Walsh, 1999a; Dufour, 2001; Gorz, 1999; Lawson & Saltmarshe, 2002; MacEwan, 1999; Snooks, 2000).

New economic ideologies (neo-liberalism) require new forms of identity construction and personality, new modes of socialization, and new ways of organizing experience (Silveria, 1990). As Cushman (1990) states, cultural conceptualisations of the self are formed by the economics and politics of their respective eras. In line with this argument, we outline how new discourses, practices and ideologies in the domains of work and

leisure have arisen to take advantage of, and to combat the pressures exerted by neo-liberalism, so that normative expressions of life have come to reflect a desire for wealth, admiration and bodily perfection.

The arguments outlined in this paper are occasionally speculative, non-empirical and based on the work of other social scientists. Our aim is to open up a range of issues in order to stimulate discussion, debate and some possible lines of inquiry for future research.

Identity construction

In the modern era we maintain that the over-riding compulsion, which governs the actions and attitudes of individuals, is the construction of a viable self-identity (Fromm, 1966, p. 61). Giddens (1991) notes:

The reflexive process of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course, there are standardising influences too – most notably, in the form of commodification, since capitalistic production and distribution form core components of modernity's institutions. (p. 5)

In earlier times, self-identity was determined by one's station at birth, community and religious observances, which provided a 'wider web of meaning' through stories, seasonal rituals and a well-defined cultural frame of reference (Baumeister, 1987; Geertz, 1973). In contemporary society, self-identity has become a 'project' that is

constituted via a process of reflexive self-ordering (Giddens, 1991). Neo-liberal society and its institutions of work and commodified leisure form the basis from which self-identity is informed (Bauman, 1988; Beck, 1992; Featherstone, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Hamilton, 2003). The subverting of the traditional roles of family, religion, labor unionism, politics and community for example has created greater individualism and disconnectedness (Putnam, 2001). As links to more traditional contexts become disconnected, commodity purchasing and mass media consumption come to the fore and with it the construction of a narcissistic personality (Lasch, 1979).

As a result of modern institutions, self-identity is now left open to inscription, codification and commodification (Castells, 2004; Giddens, 1991). This process begins when we move away from the more stable family context to the work/leisure/consumer environment as we develop through adolescence. The construction of self-identity is characterized by the objectification and commodification of one's body and personality, where the market prompts the individual to promote and sell themselves, which is viewed as the most precious exchange material (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 135; Bauman, 2007, p. 6). Under these conditions self-identity becomes a kind of cultural resource, asset or possession (Lury, 1996, p. 8), where media inducements persuade us to invest in our personalities and bodies in order to form them into smoother, more dynamic, more perfect, more functional objects for the outside world (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 131). In our quest for the perfect body we are sold diets, exercise programs, hair removal products, cosmetic surgery, cosmetic products (moisturizers, wrinkle cream, nail varnish, facial scrubs etc.), makeovers and hairdressing. Similarly, at school and in work, we are prompted to become more competitive, independent, entrepreneurial, dynamic, productive and flexible, while time away from school and work moves

towards the sphere of consumption, bodily and psychic pleasure, improvement and healing.

Narcissism

The concept of narcissism is traditionally applied to the realm of psychiatry, clinical psychology and/or psychotherapy. However, it also provides a useful understanding of identity formation in neo-liberal societies (Bourgeois, Hall, Crosby, & Drexler, 1993; McCann & Biaggio, 1989), and the nature of society and culture generally (Bocock, 1976; Freud, 1930; Fromm, 1956; Lasch, 1977, 1979). A deeper analysis of the structuring of a subject's experience, and by extension the character of society and culture under neo-liberal free market conditions requires an articulation between social relations and individual subjectivity (Silveria, 1990). An interpretation of society and culture formed on this basis depicts the relationship between neo-liberalism (the economic, social, and political) and the individual (the bodily and psychic), and therefore the dialectics between the objective and the subjective.

Freud (1957) first conceptualized narcissism by referring to two types, 'primary' and 'secondary'. Primary narcissism is a normative developmental stage beginning in early infancy. Secondary or pathological narcissism is a label applied to adults who regressively take themselves as their primary love-object rather than another (Freud, 1957). Holmes (2001) elaborates:

Secondary narcissism...covers a range of different conditions...in which people are pathologically self-preoccupied; unable to relate; approach others not as ends in themselves but as means to selfish ends; resort to 'self-soothing' behaviours such as drug addiction, deliberate

self-harm (including self-sabotage and the contamination of relationships) and promiscuous sex; (and) become self-defeatingly self-reliant. (p. 36)

The ‘diagnostic’ features of narcissism as stated in the *Diagnostic and statistical manual for mental disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) include a number of formal criteria. Beginning at the level of self-identity, the narcissist has an overblown sense of self-importance and entitlement; they are preoccupied with fantasies of success, brilliance, beauty and ideal love. Narcissists prefer to associate only with those of a high or higher status and those who display special or unique qualities. A narcissist requires and desires excessive admiration, and they hold unrealistic expectations of themselves and others. Their self-centred, self-absorbed, self-conscious behavior often creates problems in their relationships, as they consciously or unconsciously exploit others for their own ends. A narcissist will similarly show a lack of empathy, sensitivity, or acknowledgement of others’ subjective experiences and may be envious, or believe that others are envious of them (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Bourgeois et al., 1993; McCann & Biaggio, 1989).

The extension of narcissism from its diagnostic and clinical roots, to an instrument of personality and social psychological analysis is posited upon three main arguments (Lasch, 1977, 1979, 1991; Pavia, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Silveria, 1990). Firstly, the modern citizen feels powerless in the face of overwhelming global forces (Castells, 2004). The neo-liberal emphasis upon efficiencies in production and consumption offers material wealth, yet little in the way of perceived community and employment security (Bauman, 2000; Bourdieu, 1999; Neumark, 2000; Putnam, 2001; Riesman, 1961; Sennett, 1977). In an attempt to wrest some level of control the individual retreats into a range of personal preoccupations, “to psychic and bodily improvement” (Giddens,

1991, p. 171). Secondly, consumption and its driving force, advertising, provides the supposed solution to the experience of disempowerment and isolation by offering attractiveness, health, intimacy and friendship through the “purchase of the right kinds of goods and services” (Giddens, 1991, p. 172). Lastly, self-identity in modernity is a project to be created and fulfilled, which contrasts with self-society relations in more traditional contexts. Thus self-identity becomes a problem requiring resolution (Baumeister, 1987, p. 163; Giddens, 1991, p. 32-34).

Narcissistic work and leisure: Examining neo-liberalism and identity construction

Work as narcissism

It is our contention that narcissistic identities are most clearly promulgated through the domains of work and leisure. Our discussion here begins on the basis that employment in neo-liberal societies acts as a primary source of identity and status for many adults (Fevre, 2003). Secondly, aspects of work have become degraded through neo-liberal economic policies and the social relations they create (Braverman, 1974; Dankbaar, 2006; Murray, 2005; Ritzer, 1998). As Bourdieu (1998) explains, employment identities are shaped:

through the individualization of the wage relationship: establishment of individual performance objectives, individual performance evaluations...individual salary increases or granting of bonuses as a function of competence and of individual merit and individualized career paths; strategies of ‘delegating responsibility’ tending to ensure the self-exploitation of staff who, simple wage labourers in relations of strong hierarchical dependence, are at the same time held responsible for their sales, their products, their branch, their store etc. as though they were independent contractors. This pressure toward “self-control” extends workers’ “involvement”

according to techniques of “participative management” considerably beyond management level. All these techniques of rational domination impose over-involvement in work (and not only among management), and work under emergency or high-stress conditions. And they converge to weaken or abolish collective standards or solidarities. (p. 4)

These conditions of employment are shaped by the hyper-competitive global economic environment, rationalization and the singular focus on corporate profitability (Chomsky, 1999; Ritzer, 1998). This has created a volatile labour market through the gradual weakening of trade unions, increased job insecurity, longer and more intense working hours, short and/or fixed term contracts, project based employment, and an organizational culture based on the independent, self-contained ‘rugged individual’ (Bennett, Emmison, & Frow, 1999; Birch & Paul, 2003; Bitman, 1998; Bitman & Rice, 1999; Buchanan, 2001; Castells, 2000; Deery & Walsh, 1999a, 1999b; Giddens, 2000; Gorz, 1999; Hamilton, 2003; Zuzanek & Smale, 1997).

The pressures employees now face are being driven by the philosophies of ‘professional management’ that are an expression of the global free market economic model. Employees and managers alike are now expected to display dynamism, flexibility and emotional intelligence in the way they function and operate (Hughes, 2005), to be hyper-vigilant in the search for greater operating and organizational efficiencies, all of which account for the endless rounds of organizational restructuring, re-engineering, downsizing and outsourcing (Birch & Paul, 2003). Employees now face a constant stream of extra duties and responsibilities (Anderson-Connolly, Grunberg, Greenberg, & Moore, 2002). Under the pressure of greater expectation, many have become too afraid to say ‘no’ to the extra demands placed upon them, breeding a level of fear, anxiety and suspicion in many organizations (Buchanan, 2001). A highly competitive

employee culture is now prevalent in many organizations because of the need to compete with co-workers in order to ensure employment security. This has crippled the human propensity for fraternity and camaraderie, leading to a distinct lack of inter-employee reciprocity and social support (Casey, 2002; Deery & Walsh, 1999a; van Horn, Schaufeli, & Tarvis, 2001). The narcissist, Giddens (1991) argues, will sacrifice group security and loyalties by categorizing everyone as rivals; extol teamwork and cooperation, yet simultaneously hide deep antisocial impulses. They will praise respect for regulation and rules but secretly believe the rules do not apply to them, illustrating the fear of otherness implied in neo-liberalism's atomised society.

Corporate obsession with income, profit, efficiency, productivity and growth have had a particularly dramatic effect on the behaviour of white-collar professionals, who have become mesmerized by a seemingly unlimited upward mobility, significantly raising expectations and aspirations (Schor, 1991, 1999). Drucker (2001, p. 11) warns however that the "upward mobility of the urban, affluent knowledge class comes at a high price - the psychological pressures and emotional traumas of the rat race."

Even traditional workplaces such as health care and education have had to accept the realities of neo-liberalism by embracing corporate ideologies in the delivery of public services, such as schooling, universities, hospitals and aged care homes, through the development of strategic business plans (Gewirtz & Ball, 2000; Gilmartin & Freeman, 2002; White, 2000; Zipin & White, 2003). This has undermined the potential for satisfying work, as motivations for quality care and education have become expedient in the race for efficiency and profitability (Hegney, Plank, & Parker, 2003; Hetting,

Nilsson, Theorell, & Larsson, 2004; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Tuettemann & Punch, 1992; Zipin & White, 2003).

To survive, employees are now competing by working longer hours than ever before, going one better than the next employee, all to prove they are worthy. A recent survey conducted in the United Kingdom found that 42% of respondents regularly worked more than 48 hours a week, and that 51% worked longer hours than they did five years ago (Reeves, 2003). In the United States “the average employed person is now on the job an additional 163 hours, or the equivalent of an extra month a year” (Schor, 1991, p. 29). This increase has occurred over a twenty-year period, and was found to cut across class, income bracket and gender. Australia, once considered a world leader in the progressive rights afforded to its workers, now works some of the longest hours in the world (Campbell, 2001; Pocock, 2001).

A competitive employee environment, raised expectation, drive to succeed and survival instinct all conform to the neo-liberal philosophy of enterprise, entrepreneurship and conquest (Kotz, 2002). The employee, Beder (2001) argues, is motivated by consumption, because the purchase of goods and services has become the last remaining method of ensuring commitment in an increasingly secularized Western society where the protestant work ethic has failed. The result of this shift in employee culture has been a ‘work and spend treadmill’ (Cross, 1993; Schor, 1991, 1999).

To feed the desire for commodity goods and services, production mechanisms are now being placed under severe pressure to increase output at reduced costs. This has had a radical impact on the hours, speed and intensification of working life (Aldridge, 2001;

Anderson-Connolly et al., 2002; Bertman, 1998; Campbell, 2001; Davis, 1998; Gleick, 1999; Pocock, 2001; Schor, 1991). Not only are employees forced to work longer hours, they are also being forced to work 'harder and faster'. Embedded in the neo-liberal free market system is the process of money, which acquires its meaning by being 'given away' or 'circulating'. It speeds all related activities and makes them continuous; the freer the market, the faster money can flow (Simmel, 1978). Any contentment with the attained state of affairs is considered stagnation (zero growth), and punished in the competition between individuals, corporations and nations.

Leisure as narcissism

Leisure, we argue, has become an escape from the pressures of the competitive individualized labour market through the process of therapeutic consumption. The importance placed upon the acquisition and consumption of commodities has resulted in fetishism (Marx, 1867), recently conceptualized as 'over consumption', 'luxury fever' and 'influenza' (De Graaf, Wann & Naylor, 2005; Hamilton, 2002, 2003; Hamilton & Denniss, 2005). Commodity fetishism, Slater (1997, p. 125) argues, is the result of a consumer culture which provides, "false compensations for the fundamental loss of human authenticity." Compensation can be seen in the booming sales in larger houses, luxury urban high rise apartments, luxury cars, pleasure craft, home cinemas and other professional quality home equipment. The surge of interest in real estate and home improvements over the last five decades reflects the neo-liberal emphasis upon the 'home' as the site for individual aspirations and social status (Hamilton, 2003; Schor, 1999). As a result, leisure has become increasingly secluded and narcissistic (Lasch, 1979; Putnam, 2001; Sennett, 1977).

The association of leisure with consumption has become a characteristic element of neo-liberal societies, which begins in infancy, and where the child is taught to associate happiness and wellbeing with consumer products (Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchio, & Bamossy, 2003; Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Schor, 2004). These messages are particularly pervasive in television advertising (Sipiora, 2000), where in the United States the typical child now watches 28 hours of television a week, which adds up to 20,000 commercials each year (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001). Upon reaching puberty such associations are taken for granted (Schlosser, 2002). As Lury (1996) and Miles (2000) note, youth cultures are cultures of leisure and consumption organized around peer groups, where solidarity, differentiation and status, is expressed through consumer products. A recent survey conducted in Australia asked one thousand 18-30 year olds what they considered were the signs of success and accomplishment in life. Their responses, according to level of importance, were designer clothes, fame, an understanding of the internet, shopping in prestigious stores, a university degree, a million dollars and recognition as an expert (Chalke, 2004).

Such desires are expertly manipulated by the marketing and advertising industry, which offer 'lifestyle solutions' reinforcing the identification between commodities and the conversion of anxiety into pleasure and healing (Stein, 2003). Advertising, and the consumption it promotes, addresses the alienated qualities of modern social life by claiming to be its resolution (Giddens, 1991; Hamilton, 2003). It promises to cure feelings of alienation by offering attractiveness, personal popularity, attention, entitlement, admiration and omnipotence. All of us, in modern society, Giddens (1991, p. 175) argues, "live as though surrounded by mirrors, in these we search for the appearance of an unblemished, socially valued self."

Idealized images of the self are now presented vicariously through the lives of the rich and famous. These self-obsessed hedonistic lifestyles, once out of reach, have now materialized to some degree through increases in income, the falling costs of consumer products and services, and the growth and growing acceptance of cosmetic surgery (Hamilton, 2002). In neo-liberal societies the ‘heroes of production’ - the self-made men, corporate founders, pioneers, explorers and colonizers - have given way to the ‘heroes of consumption’ - film, music and sporting stars - whose excessive expenditure is exalted in the pages of countless magazines and television programs (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 45-46). There is a desire amongst many people (particularly adolescents) to live in some way like the rich and famous, which can be seen in the general ‘scaling up of needs’ in neo-liberal societies, resulting in a massive ‘over spend’ by many consumers (Schor, 1999).

This ‘scaling up’ is vividly illustrated in the changing moral attitudes towards money as evidenced by the growth in personal credit and debt. Research in the U.K. found the typical household falling into debt difficulty owed more than £25,000, compared with £10,000 three years previously. What is significant about these figures is that they do not include mortgage repayments (Wilson, 2003). In Australia more than half of 18-24 years olds now have credit or personal loan debts worth more than \$14,000 (Griffiths & Renwick, 2003). In the U.S., Schor (1999) reports that between 1990 and 1996, personal credit card debt doubled. The fallout from this surge in personal debt has been a massive increase in bankruptcies and extreme financial pressure been placed on individuals and families. All three studies place the blame for spiralling debt on spending sprees - motivated by a desire for instant access and gratification of consumer products - and a

desire to achieve an 'upscaled' lifestyle (Cushman, 1990; Griffiths & Renwick, 2003; Schor, 1999; Wilson, 2003). Schor notes:

A mere car now carries a slightly downscale image, as people shift to sport utility vehicles. The trend includes urban spas, personal trainers, limousine rides....professional quality everything – from cookware to sports equipment – and, perhaps most strikingly of all the trophy house, or McMansion. These showy dwellings, which range from four thousand to twenty-five thousand square feet, are proliferating around the country. (1999, p. 15-16).

As interest in consumption in neo-liberal societies rises, political and community engagement decreases. Material desire in the United States has been found to replace participation, for example, in parents and teachers associations, local political party membership, boy scouts, the signing of petitions, church services, labor unions and spending time with family and friends (Putnam, 2001). Similar research carried out in Australia found that 70% of people consider themselves fully disengaged from the national agenda, while their interests and aspirations reflect a desire for material abundance (Mackay, 2004). Voter turnout in national elections in neo-liberal societies paints a similar picture. The 2000 national election in the U.K. recorded a 59.2% turnout of those eligible to vote, a 19.7% drop in participation on national elections in the 1980s (Castells, 2004). In the 2000 U.S. presidential election the figure was 51.2%, which was up 2.2% on the previous national election, which recorded a lowly 49% voter turnout (Castells, 2004). Research aimed at understanding the cause of political disengagement and apathy suggests that many people now feel impotent in the face of global neo-liberalism. To compensate, they retreat into a world of consumption, and with it a self-centred existence (Castells, 2004).

Feelings of political impotency, Halmi (1998) suggests, have also had a profound impact on patterns of media consumption. The West, he argues, is being turned off by an overdose of coverage of a world that offers them only powerlessness and frustration. In the U.S. it is more profitable to provide local or domestic stories that focus on black crime, sport and celebrity gossip, in a way that entertains rather than informs, and which chooses to ignore the international dimension of news. This culture of political cynicism and apathy has resulted in an ideology of self-reliance, a disregard for the poor and disadvantaged, and a lack of concern with social harmony and cohesion, all of which have had a deleterious effect on subjective well-being in neo-liberal societies (Chong, Citrin, & Conley, 2001; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999; Kasser, 2003; Lane, 2001; Meyers, 2000; Putnam, 2001; White, 2004).

The Psychopathology of Narcissistic Work and Leisure

So far we have traced some of the neo-liberal economic, social and political conditions that have influenced and shaped a new self-identity that is highly individualized, self-absorbed and self-centred – in short narcissistic. Narcissistic self-identities are characterized by a range of behaviors, desires and expectations, including over-consumption, luxury fever, affluenza, the up-scaling of material expectations, spending and increased debt, competitiveness, independence, enterprise, entrepreneurship, dynamism, productivity, flexibility, bodily perfection and unlimited upward mobility.

To culminate, we argue that narcissistic self-identities and their promulgation through work and leisure are a contributing factor to psychological distress and disorders in neo-liberal societies. In the production sphere, chronic exposure to workplace stress, longer working hours, downsizing and employment insecurity, are linked to psychosomatic

illness, anxiety disorders and major depression (Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, 2004; D'Souza, Strazdins, Lim, Broom & Rodgers, 2003; James, 2007; Kivimaki, Vahtera, Penetti & Ferrie, 2000; Strazdins, D'Souza, Lim, Broom, & Rodgers, 2004; Wang, 2005). Furthermore, neo-liberal employment conditions have been linked to increases in the consumption of, and some cases addiction to, alcohol, tobacco, legal and illegal drugs (Kivimaki, Honkonen, Wahlbeck, Elovainio, Pentti, Klaukka, et al., 2007; Kouvonen, Kivimaki, Virtanen, Pentti, & Vahtera, 2005).

While there has been a much publicized backlash against 'work and spend' lifestyles in the West, embodied in the 'downshifting' and 'voluntary simplicity' movements, the numbers of people pursuing these alternatives, in Australia and the United States for example, are small and largely symbolic in nature (Hamilton, 2002; Schor, 1999). A far greater number of people continue to desire lifestyles of material abundance (Mackay, 2004; De Graaf et al, 2005). For example, a survey of telecommunications workers in the United States indicated that few were happy with their incomes and that it would take a salary increase of between 20% - 100% before they would be satisfied (Schor, 1999). Spending on credit has filled the void between actual salaries and material desire, as illustrated by personal consumer debt levels. In Australia credit and charge card debt has risen from \$571 million in 1985 to \$18 billion in August 2007 (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2007), in the United States credit card debt has risen from \$1000.6 billion in June 1996 to \$2442.3 billion in June 2007 (Federal Reserve, 2007), while in the United Kingdom consumer credit lending has risen from £45 billion in December 1993 to £213 billion in February 2007 (Credit Action, 2007). Consumer credit lending (i.e. personal loans, credit and charge cards) is being used to purchase luxury cars, professional home entertainment systems, furniture, clothing, cosmetic surgery, computers and overseas

holidays. This debt is on top of already record levels of mortgage debt in order to finance larger and larger homes. As De Graaf et al. (2005) notes “the average size of new homes is now more than double what it was in the 1950s, while families are smaller.” This increase in debt has led to record numbers of people experiencing financial difficulties and bankruptcies, which are linked to stress related disease, marital conflict, and in some cases family breakdown (De Graaf et al, 2005; Griffiths & Renwick, 2003; Hamilton & Denniss, 2005; Schor, 1999).

The lure of luxury lifestyles, further bind employees to an unsustainable work-life. The stress and anxiety that this produces, is converted into pleasure and healing through leisure consumerism. For example, the purchase of commodity goods is largely used to improve self-image, self-esteem, or relationships with others (Dittmar, 2005). In many instances this can be a benign activity that temporarily boosts confidence or mood. However, in some people it can also represent a disordered pattern of behavior labeled ‘compulsive buying’, defined as uncontrolled and excessive buying behavior that precedes, or results in, psychological distress and other consequences such as serious debt. Compulsive buying has become a widespread dysfunctional behaviour in neo-liberal societies, the cause of which is driven by the desire to construct and present an ‘ideal self-identity’ through consumer goods. Estimates from general population samples indicate that ‘compulsive buying’ affects between 8% – 16% of the U.S., Canadian and European populations, although clinicians more conservatively estimate figures of 2% – 5% of the population. “Turned into actual numbers, even the lowest estimate of 2% translates into 10 million compulsive buyers in the U.S. and half a million in the United Kingdom” (Dittmar, 2005, p. 834-835).

The simultaneous goals of attaining financial success and status through work, surrounding oneself with luxury possessions, cultivating the right personality, and attempting to attain bodily perfection, have become pervasive concerns for many people in neo-liberal societies (Kasser, 2003; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Kasser & Kasser, 2001; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004). However, as rates of material wealth have increased there has been a decrease in subjective wellbeing. For example, Meyers (2000) and De Graaf et al. (2005) report the paradoxical finding that as levels of affluence in the United States have spiraled, there has been a corresponding increase in human suffering. Since 1970 rates of divorce in the U.S. have increased by 100%, teenage suicide has increased by 300%, violent crime has increased by 400%, and the prison population has increased by 600%. In a similar finding Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith (1999) investigated levels of subjective well-being in the United States from 1946 – 1989 comparing it with rates of income over the same period. While personal income increased dramatically over this period levels of subjective well-being have steadily fallen.

Other evidence of this paradox was recently reported by James (2007) who quoted a World Health Study which found that over one-quarter of Americans have suffered from some form of emotional distress in the previous 12 months, compared with one-sixth as many Nigerians. Despite the fact that the United States is one of the world's wealthiest countries, over forty times richer than Nigeria, it is by some margin the most emotionally distressed of all nations.

Children and adolescents growing up in neo-liberal societies are particularly vulnerable to narcissistic leisure and its potential to manifest psychological distress and disorders.

Mayo (2005) and Griffiths (2005) indicate that many cases of substance abuse, eating disorders, anxiety disorders and major depression in young people stem from an inability to gratify consumer desires, and to conform to the thousands of idealized images produced by the music, television, film and advertising industries. For example, exposure to 'thin ideal' media images leads to body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem and negative emotions, particularly in young women (Mazzeo, Trace, Mitchell & Gow 2007; Polivy and Herman, 2004). The influence of Western television and advertising on young people can be seen in Becker's (2004) study of the Fiji islands, where television was introduced for the first time in 1995. The station airs typical Western programming such as Seinfeld, ER, Melrose Place and Xena: Warrior Princess and attendant advertising. In 1998 – 38 months after the station went on air – Becker conducted a survey of teenage girls and found that 74% felt they were "too big or fat" and that 15% reported they vomit to control their weight. Prior to the advent television eating disorders such as bulimia in Fiji were virtually non-existent.

In a similar vein, McCreanor, Barnes, Mandi, Kaiwai and Borell (2005) found that young people are heavily influenced by the 'commercialised identities' sold by alcohol companies, which is linked to increased rates of consumption, addiction and associated psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression. The pervasive influence of leisure consumption, particularly the consumption of mass media, motivates narcissistic behaviors in many young people, which places a chronic strain on parent-adolescent relationships, where adolescents constantly pit their wants and desires against their parent's ability to fulfill these (De Graaf et al, 2005).

Conclusion

In conclusion this paper has outlined some of the links between neo-liberalism, narcissistic behaviour and the increasing influence of leisure consumption on self-identity. It began with the premise that neo-liberalism has become the dominant economic, social and political ideology in wealthy Western nations, leading to a distinct shift in the mode of contemporary citizenship from production, to consumption and individualism. This has led to an identity that is shaped through interactions with the marketplace, leaving it open and vulnerable to inscription, codification and commodification. The concept of narcissism provides an understanding of identity in neo-liberal societies, and an interpretation of why expressions of life for many people have come to reflect a desire for wealth, admiration and bodily perfection.

At the root of neo-liberalism and self-identity construction are the domains of work and leisure. Work, it was argued, has become degraded through the volatility of labour market relations, increased speed and intensification, the corporatisation of public organizations, the growing influence of professional management ideologies and guidelines, hyper competitiveness, a desire for upward mobility and the atomisation of individual workers. Leisure on the other hand has become alienated as it functions to provide a defence against the rapid disruption of working life, so that stress, frustration and anxiety are converted into pleasure and healing through the consumption of goods and services.

In the final analysis we argued that narcissistic self-identities and their promulgation through work and leisure have become a contributing factor to psychological distress and disorders in neo-liberal societies. With the recognition of work and leisure as

influential in identify formation in the negative sense, we are able to provide a more sophisticated analysis of how narcissistic personalities are likely to be created in the shift from family, peers and community to the work and leisure/consumption spheres.

What is most surprising in our analysis is the seeming inability of the psychological health professions to fully acknowledge the external forces that shape identity and influence pathological behavior in neo-liberal societies. As a result there has been a failure to stem the increase in psychological distress and disorders in neo-liberal societies (Cross-National Collaborative Group, 1992; Klerman & Weissman, 1989). As Howard (2000) notes:

We are living in a very 'me-centred' period of history and many counselling and care theorists attend to individual dilemmas and dynamics with scant attention to the society and culture of which we are apart. (p. ix)

At the practice level, successfully combating increasing rates of psychological distress and disorder, such as chronic stress, anxiety and major depression in neo-liberal societies, will require greater awareness and understanding of the economic, social and political landscape that shape identity and behavior, particular the nature of leisure and its links with pathological forms of consumption, which remain largely ignored by the academic community. On a theoretical level consumption, and the domains of work and leisure, need to emerge as key themes in academic and policy debates if we are to develop a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of contemporary alienation in neo-liberal societies.

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