TOYOTA'S WILLING STOOGES: THE TREND OF NARCISSISM IN US SOCIETY

George Lundskow^{*} Grand Valley State University

This paper explores the exaltation that Toyota buyers grant the corporation, beyond simply commitment to their cars as desirable product. Although once superior in reliability, mileage, and other measurable factors in the 1980s, American and European manufacturers have matched or exceeded Toyota in these areas. Toyota devotees still declare these areas as important, but Toyota's following also includes a type of devotion beyond measurable quality and mileage issues. As a company, Toyota enjoys a type of uncritical acceptance that it exploits with marketing techniques that cross into the realm of propaganda. The paper identifies these techniques, but also argues that such techniques only succeed among a willingly submissive and willfully uncritical, i.e. emotionally devoted following premised on narcissistic insecurity and indulgence. The paper finishes with broader conclusions about contemporary American culture, specifically the search for stability and meaning. In this way, Toyota serves as only one example of a larger trend in US society.

_

^{*} Direct all correspondence to George Lundskow, Department of Sociology, 2170 AuSable Hall, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI 49401 or via e-mail: lundskog@gvsu.edu © 2008 George Lundskow.

Today, Toyota enjoys a stellar reputation for quality and reliability, as well as for leading the auto industry, and society in general, towards an environmentally 'green' future. Far beyond the supposedly unscrupulous greed of the Detroit Three—GM, Ford, and Chrysler—Toyota voluntarily sacrifices profit for consumer satisfaction and the environment. Depending on which cars one counts (because some cars are produced and sold in partnerships), Toyota surpassed GM as the best-selling carmaker worldwide in 2007.

Beyond doubt, Toyota in the 1990s through about 2003 offered cars that exceeded their Detroit Three competitors (GM, Ford, and Chrysler) overall in terms of reliability, build quality, and safety. Since 2003 however, the Detroit Three have closed the gap and now produce cars commensurate with Toyota (and other brands) in these categories, and perhaps exceed Toyota in less objective criteria such as design inspiration, excitement, and heritage. During the last six years, Toyota has in fact suffered many assembly and mechanical design problems, as well as various environmental and human rights transgressions. Despite recent media reports about environmentalist disillusionment with Toyota's opposition to stringent CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards (Naughton 2007) and development of full-size pickups and SUVs (Kiley 2007), the company retains a strong reputation for quality and environmental leadership.

While acknowledging past achievements, this paper argues that Toyota devotees overlook such failings, and more significantly, devotees do not much care about nor respond to facts. Rather, I argue that Toyota's perceived environmental and quality superiority relies on narcissistic tendencies in American culture, that people respond to inner feelings of insecurity that crave external reassurance, not active involvement in the form of critical awareness. The paper will first explore some of the complex reality behind Toyota and the automobile industry, to show how reality differs from popular perception, and then develop a social-psychological explanation for this incongruence.

Toyota: Reality versus Perception
Toyota's Fallibility

Several major quality issues include the 'engine sludge' problem, to which Toyota agreed to pay compensation for about 3.5 million engines that suf-

fered major breakdown or total failure as a result of faulty engine design (*Detroit News* 2007). Covering engines made 1997-2004, this fault caused oil to remain in the engine during oil changes, and this left-over oil formed pools that eventually produced a thick sludge that partially or completely blocked oil flow in the engine, which resulted in often dramatic failure, such as engines suddenly throwing connecting rods or even explosion through the head gasket.

More recently, full-size Tundra pickups and Sequoia SUVs suffered faulty ball joints and defective suspension components that caused a loss of steering control, which resulted in eleven accidents and six injuries (Terlep 2007). This resulted in the recall of 533,000 vehicles. On lesser issues, recent reports of the new Camry—Toyota's best-selling midsize sedan—noted irregular gaps and low-quality material in the interior, as well as sloppy welds, malfunctioning engine software (which also produced a recall), and incorrectly torqued suspension connections. In 2005 in the United States, Toyota recalled 2.38 million vehicles, which is more than the 2.26 million it sold that year (Howes 2006).

Nevertheless, Toyota enjoys a sterling reputation among car buyers, and Toyota devotees, defined as those who actively acclaim Toyota as the best car company, seem entirely oblivious to these and other issues and problems. Like anyone else on any given issue, elite bias -the agenda of elite interests—shapes media reporting and thus public perception. This sort of bias affects Consumer Reports, which regularly rates Toyota models as best in class and Toyota generally as highest in their recommendations. While this paper is not about Consumer Reports, suffice to say that, while the magazine does not accept advertising and thus may be free of such commercial bias, they suffer from a different commercial bias—the market their subscribers inhabit. This is vital, and arguably no less influential than advertising, because Consumer Reports relies entirely on subscriptions for financial support. The vast majority of subscribers live on the East and West coasts, which importantly are also the two main markets in which Toyota (followed closely by Honda) enjoys the largest market share. Presently, this share amounts to about 27%. Yet, their overall market share is only 17.4 %, reduced by a much lower 11% share in the Midwest and Texas (Welch 2007).

Consumer Reports thus suffers from a market and ideological bias. For example, the most recent Auto Buyer's Guide continues the near deification of Toyota quality, but makes no mention at all of the aforementioned recalls, nor the engine sludge problem that was settled in court through a class-action lawsuit. Furthermore, Consumer Reports methodology is severely flawed, in that it relies entirely on self-reporting from subscribers only. This yields a very high response rate for some models, but very few for other models. Overall, I suggest that Consumer Reports mostly tells its subscribers what they want to hear. Even so, Consumer Reports cannot reasonably ignore Toyota's quality problems, and recently rated the Tundra pickup, Lexus GS sedan, and the V-6 Camry as "below average" in reliability. Each competes in a market segment where other foreign and domestic models rate "above average" (Hoffman 2007a). Still, 90% of all the "recommended" models are Japanese.

In actual consumer side-by-side tests, Toyota does not compare favorably. In a recent driving test of the Honda Accord, Chevrolet Malibu, and Toyota Camry (all 2008 model year and all the best-selling model in the US for each respective company), a random sample of drivers rated the Malibu and Accord more or less equal, with the Camry a distant third. Significantly, the reviewers were all everyday drivers—regular people with no particular agenda or corporate connections (Riches 2007). In concrete comparisons, people choose cars other than the Toyota Camry.

This suggests a disparity between measurable facts and public perception. This disparity suggests that Toyota's current and increasing success depends ever less on actual quality—which is declining—and ever more on marketing, political influence, and clever public manipulation. However, Toyota has not created this situation, but rather, seizes upon pre-existing opportunity—a public desperate for good feelings about themselves. Any company that can connect self-esteem with their products would create a sort of halo, a feeling that good people buy this or that good product. After all, cars do pollute, both in their manufacture and operation, yet Americans vitally depend on cars, and indeed enjoy driving them. For those drivers who crave recognition as both a 'good person' and as 'environmentally responsible,' this kind of social-psychological conflict enables a propagandistic turn in Toyota's advertising and press rhetoric. We will return to the social-psychology of American car-buyers later. For now, let us consider Toyota's use of propaganda.

Toyota Propaganda

Although I emphasize the social-psychological relationship of the American public to Toyota, some attention must be given to Toyota's propagandistic techniques, considered here through Chomsky's propaganda model. Although Chomsky assumes a top-down elite model, his analysis of propaganda applies in this case as well. Elite interests drive propaganda efforts, but the mode of common perception determines its effectiveness. By mode, I mean the degree of critical awareness, blind submission, enthusiastic deference, apathetic indifference, or any number of other possible orientations that result from social character—the characterological traits that a population shares in common and which define their social interaction and perception. In the case of Toyota's popularity, the decisive social character trait is narcissism. We will return to that concept and argument later.

Specifically, Toyota creates what Chomsky identified as "necessary illusions." Although Chomsky applied this concept to American politics, I suggest that it applies no less to Toyota's marketing strategy, which includes, among other things, not just images and a message, which would be typical advertising, but narratives about morality and essential 'Americanness' of Toyota, presented as a natural and even sanctified choice between good cars (Toyota) and some other kind of car. Toyota positions itself as not only a rational choice, but a morally correct choice. In short, Toyota shapes perception by setting the "bounds of the expressible" (Chomsky 1989). Like all advertisements, Toyota marketing mentions only positive attributes about their products. However, this positive depiction occurs within certain bounds, which Toyota now shapes in two forms: 1) American heritage and 2) Environmental defenders. Neither of these representations are empirically accurate and both rely on feel-good sentiments. Let's consider each in turn.

Toyota's Pseudo-Heritage

While Toyota certainly has a corporate heritage, it does not reside in the United States, or at least not as Toyota tells it. For example, a recent magazine ad shows a 1950s-style artistic rendering of a Travel West ad, which

depicts a collage of natural wonders of the American West-the Grand Canyon, the Great Arch, Devils' Tower, a Saguaro cactus, and other such icons of the American West and places of interest. On a road that meanders through all these natural wonders is a Toyota 4Runner. However, it looks strange. It looks like a 1950s station wagon, more like a 1950s Chevy Nomad than an actual 4Runner, which is a mid-sized SUV. Perhaps it is a 4Runner from the 1950s? This cannot be true—the 4Runner did not appear until 1984. Moreover, Toyota did not officially enter the US market at all until 1958 with the Land Cruiser and the Toyopet, a two-door car of which Toyota sold only 137 in the US in five years, and those were below cost. In 1964, Toyota introduced the Corona PT 20, a four-door sedan that suffered from extensive reliability problems and was so prone to rust that, although sales reached 71,000 by 1968, most rusted so severely they became derelict before they could develop mechanical problems. Almost all of the sales were in California. Toyota did not manufacture anything that resembled a station wagon until 1987, with the Corolla wagon. In short, Toyota's were known as cheap and cheaply made, disposable vehicles. The image of a 1950s Toyota that resembles a 1950s American car is not only misleading but also intentionally drawing on a history that never happened, and a cultural heritage that never existed.

Why does heritage matter? American carmakers have produced some recent successes, which draw mainly on American automobile heritage, which ties in strongly to American culture in general (Gartman 1994). From youth (Best 2005) to adults (Holder and Kunz 1993) cars constitute far more than transportation, but contribute to self-identity and expression, and whether positively or negatively, to personality as well. Overall, cars are part of the American experience, and often represent the highest ideals of the American Dream, especially freedom and individual autonomy (Dewitt 2002; Flink 1976; Hinckley 2005; Miller 2001; Volti 2006; and many others). As examples, consider the cultural significance of icons such as the Chevy Corvette, the Ford Mustang, and Chrysler's 'hemi' engine (a name it has recently revived). The Detroit Three are not alone in automobile heritage. Consider the Volkswagen Beetle, and the Nissan (originally Datsun) 260 and 280Z. These and others are now highly desirable, still fun to drive, attentiongetting collectible cars. These and other such models have become cultural icons—markers that represent the union of values, memory, experience, and history. Most importantly, such icons hold collective, social significance, not just significance for this or that individual. In contrast, Toyota has never made an iconic car. As stated earlier, their appeal does not derive primarily from the cars.

To be sure, Toyota overcame its quality problems and indeed by the late 1980s delivered cars that far exceeded their American counterparts in terms of reliability. This superiority continued through the mid-1990s, when GM, Ford, and Chrysler began to close the quality gap. Since about 2001, Toyota and American cars overall show no significant statistical difference in quality, reliability, mileage, or safety (Karush 2006). This raises the importance of other non-technical factors to preeminence, factors such as heritage, excitement, and design inspiration that depend on perception and emotion more than rational assessment of measured outcomes. In order for Toyota to expand further, it must claim legitimacy in American culture as a necessary component of iconic status. Unlike Porsche, for example, which will likely remain forever decidedly German, the cars themselves as well as the Porsche name inspire loyalty and devotion. In the case of Porsche, their 'Germanness' is part of the mystique. They need not be 'American' in order to succeed.

Heritage is not the only arena that Toyota hopes to claim. Another important area that resonates strongly with some American consumers is the environment.

Toyota's Pseudo-Environmentalism

One basic truth about all car manufacturing and the operation of motor vehicles is that it creates pollution. While no one claims that Toyota as a corporation or their cars are pollution-free, many believe that Toyota leads the way in so-called green vehicles. Although the Prius (a gas-electric hybrid) is a bestseller, it presents its own, new and different environmental hazards. Most importantly, the Prius, like all current hybrids, uses a nickel-hydride battery system. Nickel must be smelted from ore that typically contains lead and mercury compounds, which produces mountains of toxic slag. Nickel itself is strongly allergenic, and is tied directly to migraines in humans (Jancin 2006) and long-term mutations in various species in the wild (Ralston, Gal-

lagher, Galbreath, and Zillioux 2005). No one has yet devised a safe means of disposal for used batteries of this type.

More importantly, Toyota's hybrid system is primitive—others, namely a joint effort from General Motors, BMW, and Mercedes—have far more advanced hybrid systems that produce better mileage and greater power (Kiley 2007) and which are now available on 2008 truck and SUV models, with cars to follow later. The Honda FCX (a fuel cell car) and the Chevy Volt (an electric car with a gasoline or diesel charger) achieve far more improved emissions along with battery designs (alkaline cells) that are far less toxic to produce. The BMW Hydrogen 7 (an all-hydrogen internal combustion engine) and GM's fuel cell vehicles (100 Chevy Equinox crossovers) are currently in the consumer testing phase.

Moreover, the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan conducted a chemical analysis of 200 cars from the 2006-2007 model year. They tested for the presence of Bromine and Chlorine compounds, as well as various heavy metals. The report (Gearhart, Posselt, Juska, and Griffith 2007) found that GM has the healthiest interiors, followed closely by Honda, while Toyota has the most toxic interiors. On a scale of 0-5 (zero is best) the highly touted Toyota Camry rated 3.2, placing it in the "moderate concern" category. Although the best-selling Toyota Corolla scored better at 2.4, it is still far worse than the class-leading Chevrolet Cobalt at 0.5 (Gearhart et al. 2007: 15).

Unlike its American and European competitors, Toyota maintains an uncertain relationship with the Japanese whaling and dolphin industry. Active over the last 10 years and in violation of international law, Japan recently decided to greatly expand its whale hunting. On November 19, 2007, the Japanese Whaling fleet departed Tokyo harbor, bound for the Whale Sanctuary in the South Sea, established by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1986. The Japanese government authorized the fleet to kill 1035 whales, including Minke, Fin, Sei, and Humpback whales, the latter two of which have been under a worldwide hunting ban since 1966. Activists from Australia and New Zealand, whose waters the fleet must pass through to reach the South Sea (near Antarctica), along with New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark and Australian foreign minister Stephen Smith implored the Japanese government to recall the fleet, without success (Biggs 2007). Australia's Prime minister Kevin Rudd ordered aircraft and a military vessel to

monitor the Japanese fleet in order to collect evidence to file a legal case in both the Justice and Criminal International Courts in the Hague (McCurry 2007) to stop the hunt.

The South Sea hunt, as well as Japanese killing of Sperm whales in the North Pacific is in clear violation of IWC law and the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species, according to legal panels convened in London, Paris, and Sydney to assess the situation. The legal assessment chair, Ambassador Alberto Szekely of Mexico concluded that Japan's behavior is clearly criminal and should not be allowed to continue (*ENS* 2007).

In an effort to pressure the Japanese government, activists in Australia led by Terri Irwin (wife of famous 'crocodile hunter' Steve Irwin), in conjunction with the Australian government, asked Toyota and the rest of the Japanese auto industry to condemn Japan's whaling activity or face a boycott (like the US, the domestic auto industry is central to at least 10% of all jobs in Japan). All, including Toyota, refused to enter the issue. Although a recent article in the New Zealand newspaper *The Dominion* reports that a Toyota customer dialogue representative, Melissa Lamont, told a concerned customer, Raewyn Sceats, that "Toyota New Zealand and Toyota Motor Corporation Japan do not condone whaling for commercial, scientific or research purposes" (Carpinter 2007), the paper was unable to confirm this with Toyota corporate headquarters, which still refuses to issue a statement on the issue. Instead, the Japanese embassy in Wellington issued an angry statement condemning the newspaper for attempting to connect the Japanese auto industry to Japanese whaling activity (Pankhurst 2007).

In comparison, the whaling industry in the US ended in 1925, and was made officially illegal with the Whaling Convention Act of 1949, as amended (strengthened) in 1970 and 1979. This act also makes all whale products and monetary earnings thereof illegal in the United States. In contrast, Japan (and Norway) seek expanded whaling activity, with eventual removal of all restrictions.

Japan in general, and Toyota in particular, have both found a very receptive audience in the Bush administration which since 2004 backs the resumption of whaling (Rizzo 2004)—a stark reversal of longstanding opposition. Toyota also has several powerful democratic lobbyists and representatives which include Walter Mondale, who convinced Bill Clinton to eliminate an import fee on luxury-class cars manufactured in Japan, and Jay Rockefel-

ler, who sponsored a successful bill to give a \$3150.00 tax credit to buyers of a hybrid. In the first year of three (2004-2007) in which the credit covers, the Toyota Prius was the only hybrid that qualified; hybrids from Honda and General Motors did not (although some states allow this credit). Just prior to this bill, Rockefeller's state of West Virginia received a new Toyota plant, and millions in donations to West Virginia schools and to Rockefeller's campaign. Lastly, Toyota effectively bought a Sierra Club endorsement by donating money to the organization, ostensibly to create an award for "Excellence in Environmental Engineering," which the Prius won. They also donated six Prius cars to the Sierra Club and paid members to drive the cars around the country and "spread the word" about the car and Toyota's commitment to environmentalism (Welch 2007).

Overall, none of these practices, with the notable exception of whaling, differs from practices that the Detroit Three or other car companies have and continue to pursue. We might even question the Detroit Three claim to heritage, a concept their commercials do not define except in vague emotional terms of patriotism and the past, as evidenced by the use of John Cougar's new song "Our Country" in Chevrolet ads. Rather, Toyota enjoys popular perception as an exception to typical corporate automotive practices, and this perception depends on a disregard of rational knowledge and understanding among American car buyers in favor of feel-good beliefs.

A note on job creation: While Toyota's expanding capital investments in the US create new jobs, the Detroit Three still overwhelmingly predominate in terms of employment. One in every twelve jobs in the US depends directly or indirectly on GM, Ford, and Chrysler, for a total of 5.2 million (ILIR-CAR 2004). Comparatively, all foreign car manufacturers combined contribute 1.8 million US jobs (CAR-ERG 2005). The same report also finds that the domestic auto industry is responsible for nearly 20% of all capital investments in the US. While their political capital in Washington and cultural capital with the public (outside the Midwest) has diminished, their importance to the US economy remains vital. Clearly, collapse of the US auto industry would devastate the US economy.

Neither has Toyota created jobs in the US consistently over time. Although data shows increases in Toyota's production capacity in the US, the increase correlates with Toyota's market share increase, and not with Toyota's overall sales. In other words, although Toyota produces more vehicles

in the US than earlier on, the percentage of imported versus domestically produced (54-44%) vehicles has remained nearly constant between 1994 and 2005, the years of greatest sales growth (CAR-ERG Report 2005).

Social responsibility also merits comment. In a recent evaluation of major global companies, the FTSE 4 Good Global 100 Index, which rates companies on a range of human rights, environmental, and social standards, removed Toyota and Honda from the list for "human rights violations" (Shepardson 2007). Co-owned by the Financial Times (of London) and the London Stock Exchange, the FTSE cited violations of its standards regarding "non-discrimination, the right to freely associate, and the right to collectively bargain" as well as "significant-sized operations in countries that have weak human rights frameworks" (Shepardson 2007). Ford and Volkswagen, among others, remained in good standing.

Along these lines in the United States, Toyota and other foreign carmakers locate new facilities in states with minimal union presence and low standards of living, which results in jobs that pay less than half of their UAW counterparts, and offer little recourse for workers if the company denies benefits, as Toyota routinely does for major medical claims at its Georgetown, Kentucky plant (Collier 2007). Until GM, Ford, and Chrysler reached a new labor contract with the UAW that begins in 2008, the Detroit Three paid an average of \$1500 per vehicle to cover worker healthcare costs compared to only \$120 per vehicle for Japanese companies (Hoffman 2007). This structural competitive disadvantage exists because the US lacks a national healthcare system—another level of complexity concealed behind Toyota's 'greenness' and Detroit reliance on large vehicles with larger price tags to maintain profitability.

Thus, in the context of social, environmental, and economic complexities, I argue that factual knowledge and rational assessment play a minimal role in Toyota's popularity, and instead a kind of lazy self-congratulation among the American public decisively configures Toyota's popularity. In short, I suggest that Toyota takes advantage of narcissism, increasingly prevalent in American society. Indeed, research shows that 62% of Prius drivers buy it because "it makes a statement about me" (Maynard 2007) up from 30% the previous year. Only 34% cited "gas mileage." Other hybrid vehicles, such as the Honda Accord and the Honda Insight—with a conventional engine even more fuel-efficient than the Prius—were both discontinued

for the 2008 model year for lack of demand. Among other factors, they lacked any external green identifier. In contrast, the unique style of the Prius announces one's pious green identity.

Narcissism Explained

Many concepts with an old pedigree such as narcissism are often misunderstood. Commonly regarded as self-love, in fact narcissism, from Freud to the present, represents a sense of self-loathing (Fromm [1941] 1994). The Narcissistic personality suffers from major ego-weakness, or in more contemporary terms, a weak sense of self, or a weak sense of identity. That is, they lack meaningful connections to people or purpose outside of themselves. Consequently, they receive no reinforcements or validation of the self. As this condition generates feelings of insecurity and fear, the person retreats into their own world, their own reality in which they typically position themselves as a ruler, an all-powerful authority figure who answers to no one (Vaknin and Rangelovska 2007). Of course, this self-focused orientation does not promote social interaction, empathy, or even every day work relations. Whenever external reality impinges on the self-congratulatory inner fantasy, the individual feels threatened and responds with anger, aggression (Twenge and Campbell 2003), and in the most extreme cases, with what Fromm ([1973] 1992, [1941] 1994) conceptualizes as destructiveness, the desire to eliminate from existence anyone or anything that threatens the illusory emotional security of the insecure individual. Both mid-Twentieth century research (see Fromm [1973] 1992) and contemporary empirical research supports this assessment (Brown 1998; Ronningstam 2000; Twenge 2007).

Importantly, the narcissistic person remains entirely passive so long as external reality allows them to remain in their self-indulgent fantasy; their thoughts and emotions are predominantly reactive, not active (Twenge 2007) and tend towards social disassociation and sometimes full-blown antisocial pathology (Kernberg 2000). While most narcissists remain socially functional, an intense resentment often resides below the surface (Ronning-stam 2005) and a constant attitude of suspicion predominates; they remain alert for any possible threat to their self-exalted feelings (Robinson and Fuller 2003). Although tense and on-guard, they will rarely initiate thought

or action because this involves the risk of uncertainty—and uncertainty intensifies narcissistic insecurity. Once established, a narcissistic personality will follow familiar routines until forced to adjust through aversive stimuli (Dutton 2006). This reactive orientation and dependence on familiarity often appears superficially as loyalty, and their intense personality traits (e.g. loud tone of voice, assertiveness, condescension) often appear as active engagement and confidence, when in fact their apparent involvement seeks only to pre-empt indeterminate social interaction. This includes avoidance of new knowledge, perspective, or any other unfamiliar and therefore anxiety-producing factor. They are routinized and defensive, not dynamic and inquisitive.

Thus, staunch Toyota devotees, especially those who project their purchase as a statement about either sensibility, environmental morality (or both) exhibit routinization and defensiveness, not active engagement. This is not a matter of rational or irrational choice, but rather, an expression of a particular social-psychological relationship.

Like any other positive or negative social-psychological relationship, narcissism develops through life experience. With this in mind, contemporary research points to the family, and to the educational system. In a recent study of American college students, researchers found heightened levels of narcissism in a sample of 16,000, that about 66% of college students scored higher than the average 1982 score on the Narcissism Personality Inventory Scale (Twenge 2007). Clearly, self-centeredness pays well in our society, that a social dominator orientation serves a person far better than a cooperative orientation. However, we should not confuse the social dominator with narcissism. The social dominator orientation arises from selfcenteredness, but not from insecurity, but from a genuine conviction of superiority and a sociopathic orientation (Alterneyer 2004; Sibley, Robertson, and Wilson 2006). In contrast, the narcissistic personality arises from deeply rooted insecurity that produces hostility towards external factual knowledge (Mirels and Dean 2006). Gas mileage, reliability, and environmental issues are real factual concerns, but Toyota is no more the divine embodiment of immaculate engineering and environmental friendliness compared to any other car company. The Toyota devotee is not a critical thinker engaged with the facts, but a highly conventional one who accepts routinized platitudes without reflection.

If narcissism is as widespread as Twenge (2007) and others have shown, then it must have some institutional source or influence; it cannot be simply a matter of personal experience or choice. In the context of educational institutions, Christopher Lasch observed narcissistic cultural trends in the mid-1970s, which he predicted would eventually dominate American culture. As Lasch argues, high school and college increasingly emphasize selfworth over and against objective achievement. That is, students are rewarded for being who they are, or who they aspire to be, rather than for actual accomplishment. Lasch contends that such approaches not only render a person incompetent to assume a productive role in society but moreover "undermines the ability of the school to serve as an agency of intellectual emancipation" (Lasch [1979] 1991: 136). Rather than calling upon students to join an inquiry into the problems of life, college permissively allows and rewards personal opinions and any preconceived notion, so long as the student feels good about it. This allows students to easily dismiss anything they don't like, anything difficult, anything that requires real intellectual effort to understand.

While an open and diverse college environment is definitely desirable and essential for intellectual emancipation, colleges must also require that students actively engage the material and connect thought with evidence in order to develop perspective. Universities are full of competing views, as they should be, but they seldom require that students adjudicate their comparative veracity. Unfortunately, 'critical' evaluation usually means the student must submit to whatever the professor feels is correct, while other professors indulge every whim and opinion as supposed respect for diversity.

If college is the greatest purveyor of narcissism, it is not the only one. As Lasch argued about 15 years before the rise of the Internet and reality TV shows, "[T]he proliferation of visual and auditory images in a society of the spectacle...encourages a similar preoccupation with the self. People respond to this as if their actions were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time" (Lasch [1979] 1991: 239). This statement seems extremely prescient, as it describes the impact of the Internet through sites such as YouTube and MySpace, as well as so-called reality TV shows like *The Real World*, *Survivor*, and many, many others. These sites harbor the cult of the self and purvey the gospel in action that reveals the way to self-obsession. Numerous Internet sites offer personally controlled access, where people post inane images

and desultory ramblings of blog commentary about everything and nothing. The web allows the individual to regulate access to the site itself, as many people cannot even tolerate so much as a negative e-mail from uninvited viewers. One can say or post anything, but carefully select what to receive in response. While greater access to the media and thus a greater ability to be heard benefits a democratic society, statements without accountability and without facing criticism reinforces "a protective shallowness, a fear of binding commitments, a willingness to pull up roots whenever the need a[rises], a desire to keep one's options open, a dislike of depending on anyone, and an incapacity for loyalty or gratitude" (Lasch [1979] 1991: 239).

In other words, such sites convey and encourage people to engage in self-congratulatory proclamations and delusional brilliance with no fear of criticism or requirements of responsibility. In conventional publishing, monetary and other costs in production and liability necessitate a fully professional approach, with an emphasis on excellence in fact, analysis, and expression. In contrast, Internet sites often amount to little more than pointless intellectual drivel, inane personal activities, unimaginative or ridiculous video and verse, and anonymous slander. If one only seeks confirmation of Toyota's superiority, one need look no further than Consumer Reports. To include reviews and analysis from other publications, including engineering journals adds complexity and newness that one cannot resolve with only sincere emotions. To consider analysis from edmunds.com or J.D. Power & Associates for example, both of which use representative samples of consumer experiences, requires one to weigh competing possibilities about Toyota, and even to accept that driving any car inherently involves moral ambiguity and other tradeoffs.

Given Lasch's observations in 1979, the Internet is clearly not the beginning of narcissism in American social character and culture, but the latest and most intensive expression of it. As a means of communication, the Internet offers tremendous potential, but its specifically narcissistic manifestations relate to larger cultural developments that parallel economic developments. To a great extent, college students and others who use personal web pages intensively merely pursue their own interests as consumer culture encourages everyone to do.

However, social character is by no means predetermined, nor cultural forces inexorable. For example, as Jane Addams ([1899] 2002) observed in late 19th century Chicago, the working class responds to the exigencies of capitalism very differently compared to management or small business owners. Out of camaraderie, they embrace each other rather than compete over and against each other. They share what they have, and choose community rather than competition. In the late Nineteenth century, the urban working class had few opportunities for advancement, but even when such opportunity arose, usually as an offer from the company to break union leaders away from the other workers, most preferred collective improvement over personal gain. Thus, narcissism is only one of many possible social character outcomes of consumer capitalism. While people must develop a self that allows them to function within society, they may also actively choose alternatives. Thus, we require a dynamic theory of social interaction and character formation

Social Character

As one of many possible social-psychological outcomes within capitalist society, we should briefly consider the larger social parameters of social character development, or as David Riesman also terms it, the mode of conformity. Any society must create a certain degree of psychological conformity regarding social interaction. Social character thus differs from individual character—the former describes the traits that people hold in common, while the latter describes the traits that distinguish people from each other.

In this case, narcissism has moved from a mostly individual character trait to a much more socially prevalent one. For such a transition occur, society must be different now in certain decisive ways than in earlier times. While still far from a deterministic situation, any given society promotes and rewards certain orientations, and discourages and punishes others. Contemporary American culture rewards and encourages narcissism (along with other anti-social orientations) and discourages, for example, altruistic work and selfless action. Riesman identifies three major epochs in human history, each with a particular mode of conformity, that is, social character: tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed (Riesman [1961] 2001: 8).

In the West, inner-directedness supplanted tradition through a revolution, known as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The spirit of the

times encouraged individual freedom and a break with tradition, what Erich Fromm ([1941] 1994) calls freedom-from oppression. At that time, tradition appeared increasingly oppressive, as it demanded conformity to the past in a rapidly changing world premised on innovation, imagination, and personal achievement. Meaningful social mobility existed for the first time, and this economic and status opportunity opened the door to innovation in other ways—economic, intellectual, and spiritual. It was the time of the rise of capitalism, of breakthroughs in art and science, and the Protestant Reformation.

All of this promoted and indeed required an inner-directedness, that the individual now followed the dictates of heart and mind rather than tradition and the past. Tradition does not die completely, but rather splinters into numerous and competing directions, following class, ethnicity, and other cultural currents (Riesman [1961] 2001: 16). What we call late modernism for Riesman corresponds on a social-psychological level to fully developed inner-directedness, in which the individual conforms to social norms to the extent such conformity serves the interest of the individual by creating a stable social environment. Meaning in life derives from personal accomplishment—these are very goal-oriented people—the success of demonstrably measurable achievement.

Other-directedness, a relatively new phenomenon when Riesman wrote in 1961, seems quite prevalent today, and very similar to the conception of narcissism that Lasch uses. Other-directedness refers to people who depend entirely on their peers, both those they know directly and those they imagine they know remotely, usually through media images (Riesman [1961] 2001: 21). Having no particular center, the other-directed person requires constant approval, constant legitimation from their peers, whether real or imagined, in order to function. Without constant reinforcement, the other-directed person lapses into feelings of inferiority, powerlessness, and the fantasies of narcissism. If external reality fails to provide the necessary reinforcement, the other-directed person can invent their own selfreinforcement. Yet in contrast to the inner-directed person, narcissistic reinforcement results from fantasy, not active engagement with the external world. The inner-directed person looks around and envisions ways to overcome external challenges; the other-directed narcissist retreats to a world of self-obsession and aggrandizement. That is, the inner-directed person attempts to change the world; the other-directed attempts to change their

own view of the world. Riesman sees two problematic social consequences of other-directedness that are relevant here: false personalization, and problems of competence.

False Personalization

Although the consumer society promises personal fulfillment through choices in consumption, the vast majority of commodities are tailored very little if at all to individual tastes. Rather, the individual chooses from whatever is offered, as commodities are massed produced, not produced according to personal specifications, and definitely not according to personal inspiration and design imagination. More importantly, the search for self and identity in commodities arises from the lack of meaning in work, the activity in which we spend most of our time and attention. As people expect self-validation through uncritical social acceptance, then work includes the same standard of sociability—that accomplishment alone does not earn respect. In addition to accomplishment, each individual must contribute to the overall "emotional management," such that "the achievement of harmony sometimes becomes not a by-product of otherwise agreeable and meaningful work but an obligatory prerequisite" (Riesman [1961] 2001: 268). Although this harmony is supposedly based on respect for the individual in reality it requires a negation of the self. It requires that a person suppress their critical passions and intellect so as not to risk any sort of remark or behavior that some one person might find offensive or in any other way troubling.

If social interaction disallows even the slightest degree of discomfiture for even one person, then only generic and inconsequential interaction can result (not to mention organizational failure). This sort of social environment suppresses rather than promotes individuality, and it also negates progress in any real sense of the word. If Riesman is correct, that emotional harmony is a prerequisite to social interaction, a proposition that Twenge (2007) confirms empirically, then elite interests may even more readily manipulate popular opinion, as the population is already committed to the dominant trend for fear of upsetting the stability of the consensus, the harmony of the herd. Let us consider that prospect for a moment, and dare to say: Objectively speaking, Toyota is no more reliable, fuel-efficient, labor-friendly, or environmentally friendly than any other car company. Does this not violate

so-called 'common knowledge' or 'traditional wisdom?' Might it hurt a Toyota-owners feelings?

The Problem of Competence

If no one may freely critique others, indeed, if critique that may result in rejection is specifically not allowed, then competence in the workplace, as well as in marriage, friendship, or any other social relation becomes a non-issue. Emotional harmony preempts accomplishment, and therefore also preempts standards and qualifications that cannot be determined without some process of adjudication, because this risks disharmony. The other-directed person cares "more for the mood and manner of doing things than for what is done, and feels worse about an exclusion from others' consciousness..." than any other type of offense (Riesman [1961] 2001: 288). As Erich Fromm argued long ago, "truth is made out to be a metaphysical concept, and if anyone speaks about wanting to discover the truth he is thought backward by the 'progressive' thinkers of our age. Truth is declared to be an entirely subjective matter, almost a matter of taste" (Fromm [1941] 1994: 247). Again, without a means of adjudication and the corresponding strength of self to both reject someone as incompetent (or elevate demonstrable achievement above mediocrity) and at the same time accept one's own shortcomings, social relations can only be passive and generic—a herd. Truth telling in the workplace has become one of the least respected qualities today, between white-collar coworkers (Bodakan and Fritz 2006; LeBow and Spitzer 2002) and among management (Welch and Welch 2007) in both public organizations (Denhardt 2000) and private corporations (Cox and Hoover 2007).

Conclusions

College (like high school before it) most powerfully encourages a narcissistic self to the extent it delivers rewards and recognition without the requirement of actual accomplishment. While some few classes place real challenges on students and demand improvement, the overall college experience increasingly constitutes an extended period of narcissistic indulgence rather than an intense exploration of the world and its problems. Even once genu-

inely rigorous and critical disciplines fail today, with sociology reduced to ideology and the humanities reduced to irrelevance, students expect to receive the degree they pay for, like any other commodity. Without actual accomplishment, a person has only praise to feel good about, and praise, much like the status brokers of high school cliques, disappears as easily as it is given. In order to develop genuine critical awareness, which students must have to avoid floating rudderless and adrift in the vast sea of academe, educators must enforce a process of adjudication.

While uncritical self-aggrandizement and narcissism increasingly characterizes education at college, such tendencies increasingly characterize American culture generally. While non-students and college graduates alike face real-world realities that often require emergence from the fantasies of narcissism, such emergence need take only a superficial form in order for the individual to function in a career. The essential self may remain fully narcissistic, and to the extent it conflicts with the demands of genuine social life, it generates resentment and hostility. In short, a person may remain essentially narcissistic and anti-social, yet still socially functional. Emotional allegiance to Toyota, or any other person or thing, may rest on different foundations, including rational analysis or objective goals. In this case, the supposed goal of environmental improvement, worker's rights, or even rational consumption through allegiance to Toyota (or any other car company) is objectively futile.

Indeed, major corporations have consistently opposed social justice movements, environmental regulations, and indeed anything that impinges on profit. Regarding the environment, for example, the Environmental Superfund, created in 1980 under the Carter Administration, it used a special tax on pollutive industry to clean up toxic waste sites. Reagan restructured the Superfund and eliminated the corporate tax, such that today all of its funds derive from general tax revenue. In gay rights, national health care, and the war in Iraq, big business remains silent or opposed to progressive change. The point is that the environmental movement today, with rhetoric of carbon footprints, Toyota worship, and the demonization of the Detroit Three represents narcissistic indulgence, not objective analysis or a coherent environmental movement. Toyota and other elite interests thus seize upon this desire to fit in, to go with the group, to graze with the herd. The easy truth of supposed Toyota superiority in quality and environmental sensitivity sits comfortably with the individual who cherishes emotional har-

mony and who trembles and quakes at the prospect of disagreement or admissions of technical inadequacy. While 'trend-follower' offers a convenient term, it actually refers to a complex social psychological interaction between the individual and the demands of capital-driven work and consumption. Still, narcissism arises from an unwillingness to engage in anything difficult or challenging, and a simultaneous demand for validation based on mere essence, just as students expect participation points in class simply for showing up and an 'A' grade simply for turning in the paper.

Capitalism bears some but not all of the blame for narcissism today, because capitalism also requires that people effectively manage companies and that workers effectively perform their work. Hopefully, we also expect that the surgeon competently practices medicine and the engineer competently masters airplane and bridge design technology. In nearly any career field, as well as in personal relationships, insecure self-serving phonies and incompetent buffoons co-mingle with people of competence, sincerity, and substance. Social-psychological experience and the choice of will also play a part.

This explains why personal gratification through angry rhetoric and righteous rage about false issues such as 'who killed the electric car?¹' supersedes objective accomplishment. Reality is much harder: "it is much easier to get excited from anger, rage...than by love and productive and active interest. The first kind of excitation does not require the individual to make an effort—one does not need to have patience and discipline, to learn, to concentrate, to endure frustration, to practice critical thinking, to overcome one's narcissism and greed" (Fromm [1973] 1992: 271). One need not even bother to be a competent consumer.

¹ The electric car in question, the EV-1 by General Motors (GM), was never intended for mass production. It was a prototype released to the public for consumer testing in real-world conditions. Contrary to the oil-auto industry conspiracy claims made in the film *Who Killed the Electric Car*, GM always intended to retain the cars for study, and thus offered the EV-1 only as a lease with no option to buy. Long-term product liability was also a concern, and no spare parts were tooled because of very low production volume (1117 units). GM did not attempt to erase all record of its existence as the film claims, but rather dismantled some vehicles to study wear and tear, and donated others to schools and museums, with 40 currently on public display (wikipedia.org). In fact, improved EV-1 technology will appear in the 2009 Chevrolet Volt, a plug-in electric car with a gasoline augmentation system—the gas engine does not drive the car, but only powers an electric generator as needed. EV-1 technology also appears on the Chevrolet Equinox Fuel Cell crossover, a set of 100 test vehicles now in the consumer testing stage.

To overcome this, our culture must be willing to say that some explanations, some perspectives are factually, logically, or morally wrong. At the same time, we must be willing to actively seek the truth and devise a strategy, and accept that progress comes in starts and stops. In order to discern any form of *veritas*, one must possess both information, and the ability to analyze information. If we genuinely seek *veritas*, it is not enough to be a truth-teller; we must also have the self-confidence to accept hard truths from others—and our own fallibility. This opens the possibility for active self-determination, rather than passive acquiescence to what is easy. It is also what capitalism (or any system of inequality) fears most, that people may not simply play the game but demand more from life than an endless routine of work and consumption.

Toyota (and numerous other corporations) takes advantage of a dearth of critical awareness and accurate information among the American public. Yet the problem lies not simply in a lack of accurate information, but a lack of desire to have accurate information. People increasingly embrace what feels good emotionally, not what is substantively true. Toyota's marketing campaign becomes propaganda because people allow themselves to be manipulated. In a recent article in *Business Week*, called "Why Toyota is Afraid of Being Number One" (Welch 2007), the answer, as outlined above, is straightforward: number one status would draw much greater scrutiny, and Toyota has a lot to hide. The American car buyer remains blissfully unaware, and likes it that way.

References

- Addams, Jane. [1899] 2002. "The Subtle Problem of Charity." *The Jane Addams Reader*, Jean Bethke Elshtain, ed. New York; Basic Books.
- Altemeyer, Bob. 2004. "Highly Dominating, Highly Authoritarian Personalities." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 144, 4: 421-448.
- Best, Amy L. 2005. Fast Cars, Cool Rides: The Accelerating World of Youth and Their Cars. New York: New York University Press.

- Biggs, Stuart. 2007. "Japan's Whaling Fleet Sails, Adds Humpbacks to Hunt." Bloomberg News, November 19.
- Bodaken, Bruce, and Robert Fritz. 2006. *The Managerial Moment of Truth: The Essential Step in Helping People Improve Performance.* New York:

 The Free Press.
- Brown, Nina W. 1998. *The Destructive Narcissistic Pattern.* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- CAR-ERG Report. 2005. *The Contribution of the International Auto Sector to the U.S. Economy: An Update.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Carpinter, Bernard. 2007. "We Oppose Whaling, Toyota Says." *The Dominion*, December 21.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1989. *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies.* Boston: South End Press.
- Collier, Joe Guy. 2007. "Toyota Employees Back Worker Rights Board." *Detroit Free Press*, April 1.
- Cox, Danny, and John Hoover. 2007. *Leadership When the Heat is On.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Denhardt, Robert B. 2000. *The Pursuit of Significance: Strategies for Managerial Success in Public Organizations.* Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Detroit News. 2007, January 30th. "Toyota to Settle Engine Sludge Class Action Suit."
- Dewitt, John. 2002. *Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Kulture.* Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press.
- Dutton, Donald. 2006. *The Abusive Personality, Second Edition. Violence and Control in Intimate Relationships.* New York: The Guilford Press.
- ENS (Environmental News Service). 2007. "Japan's Whaling Fleet Sails Despite International Censure." November 20.
- Flink, James J. 1976. The Car Culture. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press.

- Fromm, Erich. [1973] 1992. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Fromm, Erich. [1941] 1994. *Escape from Freedom.* New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Gartman, David. 1004. *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design.* New York: Routledge.
- Gearhart, Jeff, Hans Posselt, Claudette Juska, and Charles Griffith. 2007. The Consumer Guide to Toxic Chemicals in Cars, Model Year 2006/2007 Guide To New Vehicles. Ann Arbor, MI: The Ecology Center.
- Gordon, Larry and Louis Sahagun. 2007. "Gen Y's Ego Trip Takes a Nasty Turn." Los Angeles Times, February 27th.
- Hinckley, Jim. 2005. *The Big Book of Car Culture: The Armchair Guide to Automotive Americana*. St. Paul, MN: Motorbooks Publishing.
- Hoffman, Bryce G. 2007. "Health Tab to Soar at GM." *Detroit News*, February 27.
- Hoffman, Bryce G. 2007a. "Ford Gains, Toyota slips in Quality." *Detroit News*, October 17.
- Holder, William G. and Phillip Kunz. *American Muscle Cars.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Howes, Daniel. 2006. "Toyota Recalls prove Juggernaut is Fallible, but Fixable." *Detroit News*, August 28th.
- ILIR-CAR Report. 2004. Contribution Of The U.S. Motor Vehicle Industry To The Economies Of The United States, California, New York, And New Jersey In 2003. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Jancin, Bruce. 2006. "Migraine Traced to Nickel Allergy after PFO Closure." Internal Medicine News, 39, 19: 17-18.
- Kernberg, Otto F. 2000. *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism.*Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Kiley, David. 2007. "Is GM's Green Tech Better Than Toyota's?" Business Week, November 14.

- Lasch, Christopher. [1979] 1991. *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations.* New York: W.W. Norton.
- LeBow, Rob, and Randy Spitzer. 2002. *Accountability: Freedom and Responsibility without Control.* San Francisco: Berret-Koehler.
- Maynard, Micheline. 2007. "Green Message Aids Prius Sales." *The Detroit News*, July 5.
- McCurry, Justin. 2007. "Japan Abandons Plan to Kill Humpback Whales." *The Guardian*, December 22.
- Miller, Daniel. 2001. *Car Cultures.* Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave | Berg Publishers.
- Mirels, Herbert L. and Janet B. Dean. 2006. "Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Attitude Salience, and Beliefs about Matters of Fact." *Political Psychology*, 27, 6: 839-866.
- Naughton, Keith. 2007. "Toyota's Green Problem." Newsweek, November 19.
- Pankhurst, Tim. 2007. "Embassy Deeply Regrets Newspaper's Anti-Whaling Campaign." *The Dominion*, December 21.
- Ralston, N.V.C., J.R. Gallagher, K.C. Galbreath, and E.J. Zillioux. 2005. "Comparison of DNA Damage Resulting from Exposure to Various Nickel Species." *Proceedings of the North Dakota Academy of Science*, 59: 75-76.
- Riches, Erin. 2007. "Consumer Comparison Test: 2008 Family Sedans Honda Accord vs. Toyota Camry vs. Chevrolet Malibu." www.edmunds.com/advice/buying/articles/123972/article.html.
- Riesman, David. [1961] 2001. The Lonely Crowd, Revised Edition: A Study of the Changing American Character. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rizzo, Alessandra. 2004. "Whaling conference considers phased-in resumption of whaling." San Diego Union Tribune, July 22.
- Robinson, Hazel and Victoria Graham Fuller. 2003. *Understanding Narcissism in Clinical Practice*. London: Karnac Books.
- Ronningstam, Elsa F. 2005. *Identifying and Understanding the Narcissistic Personality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Ronningstam, Elsa F. 2000. *Disorders of Narcissism: Diagnostic, Clinical, and Empirical Implications*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Shepardson, David. 2007. "Asian Companies Off Responsible List." *Detroit News*, October 17.
- Sibley, Chris G., Andrew Robertson, and Marc S. Wilson. 2006. "Social Dominance Orientation and Right-Wing Authoritarianism: Additive and Interactive Effects." *Political Psychology* 27, 5: 755-768.
- Terlep, Sharon. 2007. Toyota Recalls 533,000 trucks, SUVs." *Detroit News*, January 19th.
- Twenge, Jean M. 2007. *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before.* New York: The Free Press.
- Twenge, Jean M. and Campbell, W. K. 2003. "Isn't it Fun to get the Respect that We're Going to Deserve? Narcissism, Social Rejection, and Aggression." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29: 261-272.
- Vaknin, Sam and Lidija Rangelovska. 2007. *Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited*. Prague: Narcissus Press.
- Volti, Rudi. 2006. *Cars and Culture: The Lifestory of a Technology.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Welch, David. 2007. "Why Toyota is Afraid of Being Number One." Business Week, March 5.
- Welch, Jack, and Suzy Welch. 2007. "It's Insular at the Top: Did Chuck Prince and Stan O'Neal Lose Touch with the Companies they Ran?" Businessweek, November 8.