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Humanistic antidotes for a narcissistic social media addicted society

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ABSTRACT

This article describes 'humanistic antidotes' to offset the widespread narcissism and social media addiction prevalent in current US society. The dominant focus of this article is in humanistic education, in which the author's efforts at getting psychology college students to put away their cell phones, 'talk with each other', and gain awareness of the detrimental effects of social media addiction and narcissism are illustrated. In addition, the author's facilitation of a creative artists' support group is briefly described as another illustration of humanistic antidotes to the widespread narcissism and social media addiction in US society. The methodology utilized is based upon autoethnographic research, where relevant experiences of the researcher are considered to be an informative and fundamental part of the research. The author describes in narrative form his relevant experiences in formulating humanistic antidotes to the excessive and inappropriate use of social media he encountered in his college psychology teaching.

Introduction

A half-century ago, Humanistic Psychology was an exciting new 'third force' in the world of psychology, strongly competitive with the then dominant psychologies of psychoanalysis and behaviorism (Moss, 2015; Taylor & Martin, 2015). Maslow's theory of self-actualization and Rogers' practice of client/person-centered psychotherapy were well respected and popular in the psychology mainstream of the 1960s and 1970s (Maslow, 1962; Moss, 2015; Rogers, 1961; Taylor & Martin, 2015). However, in today's world of psychology the picture is very different, as Humanistic Psychology and psychotherapy currently constitute a relatively marginal force, taking a back seat to the dominant psychotherapy influences of psychiatric medications and cognitive behavioral therapy (Aanstoos, 2015; Benjamin, 2008a; Hayes, 2015; O'Hara, 2015; Olfman & Robbins, 2012; Taylor & Martin, 2015).

There is currently a growing interest in the relationship of Humanistic Psychology to multiculturalism and to social/political action (Benjamin, 2011; Comas-Diaz, 2015; DeRobertis, 2015; Hoffman, Cleare-Hoffman, & Jackson, 2015; Rice, 2016). However, the relationship of Humanistic Psychology to the detrimental social aspects of excessive technology

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use with the related detrimental consequences of widespread narcissism is a topic that is just in its beginning stages of exploration.

Based upon his survey of current research, Christopher Aanstoos made some impactful preliminary observations concerning these dangers:

> Robots and/or computers are increasingly taking care of children and the elderly, but they do not care about them … . [T]he recipients think they are loved by machines, a shallowing out takes the place of genuine human relations … . Time spent on the Internet means less time spent with friends and even with families. Research done at the early phase of this development showed that increasing computer usage results in more loneliness and depression … . [I]ncreasing reliance on such technologies [such as Facebook] can dangerously reshape one's emotional life, resulting in fewer and more superficial relationships … . [T]he typically more narcissistic and impulsive online 'personas' are dangerous because they contribute to the person becoming more impatient and grandiose in life … . The great conundrum here may be that as people now communicate more *quantitatively*, they may do so less *qualitatively* [*sic*]. (Aanstoos, 2015, pp. 246–247)

It goes without saying that computers and technology have enormous benefits in terms of our abilities to gather information and communicate instantaneously in a global network (Aanstoos, 2015). However, what I am concerned about, and will address in this article, is what I believe are the grave social dangers of excessive technology use, which has been characterized as social media addiction, coupled with the corresponding dangers of a societal epidemic of excessive narcissism (Addiction.com Staff, 2012; Agarwal & Kar, 2015; Anderson, 2015; Augenbraun, 2014; Benjamin, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b; Bochner, 2014; Lasch, 1979; McNamee, 2014; O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011; Song, Larose, Eastin, & Lin, 2004; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Young, 2009).

The way in which I will address these concerns is based upon the qualitative research methodology of autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Wertz, 2011). Autoethnography was developed in the last few decades of the twentieth century, largely through the efforts of sociologist Carolyn Ellis (2004, 2009), and focuses upon the social dynamics and context that the researcher is investigating. However, unlike strict ethnographic research that does not include personal reflections of the researcher, autoethnography extends participant observation research through placing a significant reliance upon the relevant feelings, thoughts, perspectives, experiences, reflections, insights, and personal stories of the researcher, and often involves a high level of personal vulnerability in terms of revealing emotional/private aspects of oneself (Benjamin, 2013; Bochner, 2014; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Holman Jones et al., 2013).

In my previous related work, I have described what I have learned about social media addiction in US society, as well as what I have referred to as 'humanistic antidotes' to this social media addiction, through my teaching of two undergraduate psychology courses – Introduction to Psychology and Human Growth & Development – at a university in Maine (Benjamin, 2015a, 2015b), which I will refer to for anonymity reasons as simply the University. I have also described in my previous related work what I have referred to as 'unbridled narcissism' in US society as the 'new normal' (Benjamin, 2015c, 2016a). In the present article, I will expand upon my previous work as described above, in the context of the humanistic antidotes that I intensively explored to try to offset both the social media

addiction and narcissistic qualities that I observed in my psychology students during my final semester of teaching at the University.

The cell phone challenge/ordeal in the college classroom

In my spring 2015 teaching of Human Growth & Development at the University, I required all my psychology students to submit three project papers, the last one being an academic psychology paper based upon a topic of their own choosing. As it turned out, the most popular topic chosen was that of excessive technology use, as out of my class of 20 students, three students chose this topic specifically and a fourth student included this topic in his more encompassing topic of 'Americanization'.[1] Referring to Agarwal and Kar (2015), one of my above three students said the following in regard to the excessive use of cell phones and technology in our society:

> For just about everybody, their phone is their life. That is how they keep in contact with everyone; that is where all their pictures are, and so on. Now even today I do not think one could imagine life without technology and social media. Use of technology is essential to make the tasks of life easier; however, its abnormal, excessive unnecessary use leads to addiction and makes life more difficult.

It is precisely this 'abnormal, excessive unnecessary use' of cell phones in the college classroom that I want to initially discuss, as I believe this is one of the main obstacles in establishing humanistic antidotes to the dual epidemic of social media addiction and narcissism for college students in our US society.

It is now commonly agreed upon that in spite of the beneficial effects of the appropriate use of cell phones to effectively and quickly gather academic information, inappropriate cell phone use in high school and college classrooms is currently a pervasive problem in US society. The detrimental effects reported include: distraction from schoolwork and class activities, short attention spans, diminished reading capacity, lower GPA, higher anxiety, lower satisfaction with life, cheating on tests, and rudeness (Earl, 2012; Fulbright, 2013; Hopke, 2009; Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014; Song et al., 2004; Weimer, 2014; Young, 2009). However, the following has been suggested to offset these detrimental effects of inappropriate cell phone use in the classroom:

> The effective teacher must connect with his or her students in order to hold their attention. There must be a magnetism, a bond between them, a sparking of a brotherhood in the battle for Knowledge – a quest to figure things out, to understand, and to marvel and rejoice in that insight … . The teacher's goal must be to instill an insatiable desire to learn. (Earl, 2012, pp. 5–6)

As I think back to my own recent college psychology teaching experiences regarding cell phone use in the classroom, I wish I could say that I was completely successful in the 'sparking of a brotherhood in the battle for knowledge' with my students. However, the best I can say is that I tried to do this and perhaps made some headway with some students. The basis of my attempts to offset the detrimental effects of cell phone use in my psychology classrooms revolved around the interpersonal dialogue focus of humanistic education (Rogers, 1969)[2] that I utilized in teaching my university psychology classes.

Each semester, the ubiquitous use of cell phones by my students became more and more glaring to me, both in and out of the classroom. During the spring 2016 semester,

which I decided would be my last semester of teaching in the classroom, I required my Human Growth & Development psychology students to engage in small-group discussions every class period, three times a week, for the last two thirds of the semester. This to me was an important aspect of humanistic education, which is based upon the work of Carl Rogers (1961, 1969), and involves empathy, caring about students, genuineness on the part of the learning facilitator, student choice and control, and teaching the 'whole person'.[3] Initially when I would lecture for a half to two thirds of the 50-minute period, I could see that a handful of my students would be surreptitiously (or not so surreptitiously) engaged on their cell phones, presumably immersed in their social media communications. This struck me as incredibly rude and disrespectful, and virtually every class period I would give my students a lecture about not using their cell phones in class, occasionally singling out particular students when the offense was especially obvious and/or brazen. However, I knew from the responses of both my psychology and mathematics students of the previous semester that students would essentially just ignore me, and find more surreptitious ways of using their cell phones during class,[4] which is consistent with what many other educators have reported (Earl, 2012; Fulbright, 2013; Lepp et al., 2014; Song et al., 2004; Weimer, 2014; Young, 2009). I thus decided to make a radical change in my teaching, as I subsequently chose one particular topic to review for 10 or 15 minutes each class period, with the remaining time devoted to my students engaging in personal/academic small-group discussions and weekly whole-class sharing of material from the week's chapter that was particularly meaningful to them, and the weekly quizzes (see the next section, 'Getting students to talk with each other').

My switching over to student discussion for most of the period, with significant reduction of the amount of time that I lectured, certainly helped diminish the inappropriate use of cell phones in my classroom, though not entirely. When some students in small groups were either bored or could not think of anything more to discuss, they would take out their cell phones, and it seemed that in virtually every class session I needed to remind students that it was not appropriate to use their cell phones in the classroom, and that this would result in a lowering of their class-participation grade. After a while, I started to feel more like a policeman than a teacher, as I would walk by students who looked like they were suspiciously using their cell phones (and would then quickly put them away) either during my brief lectures or their small-group discussions or our whole-class sharing. The previous semester I had experienced my inappropriate cell-phone use initiation when I learned from a student who was very disturbed that the entire last row of students had been using their cell phones to cheat on their quizzes;[5] thus I was now 'on the ball'. As one university instructor wrote in his course syllabus: 'If I see you looking at your crotch and smiling, you are dismissed' (Fulbright, 2013, p. 3).

I thus believe that the first step in finding humanistic antidotes to offset the dual dilemma of social media addiction and narcissism in our society is to find relatively effective ways of dealing with the inappropriate use of cell phones, especially in college (and high school) classrooms. This is certainly easier said than done, though there are various suggestions that have been made to accomplish this feat (Earl, 2012; Fulbright, 2013; Hopke, 2009; Weimer, 2014). But the main point I want to make is that before students have any potential to relate to each other with 'warmth, empathy, and genuineness', they need not be addicted to electronically engaging with their multitude of 'friends' on social media via their cell phones.

Getting students to talk with each other

In my previous article concerning 'unbridled narcissism', I wrote the following:

> A few months ago there was a widely publicized murder of a television reporter and cameraman in the United States.[6] This murder received a tremendous amount of publicity, in particular because the actual murder was captured on video for millions of people to watch on their television sets, as purposely and successfully planned out in detail by the killer. As I read about this horrific murder I came across an explanation of the phenomenon of people wanting to be 'famous' by publicizing their aggressive acts, including severe beatings and murders, on videos for millions of people to watch. And this explanation had everything to do with our whole narcissistic society. The explanation was given by Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, and I learned that they had written a book a few years ago entitled *The Narcissism Epidemic*[7] which described in much detail various destructive aspects of what they referred to as the epidemic of narcissism in our Western culture, with inroads that are entering Eastern culture as well. (Benjamin, 2015c, pp. 1–2)

As I described in this article (Benjamin, 2015c), the concern that we live in a narcissistic culture was spearheaded by Christopher Lasch's (1979) best-selling book *The Culture of Narcissism*, and the current picture painted by Twenge and Campbell (2009) describes how:

> virtually every aspect of the world that we (Westerners) currently live in is pervaded by the combination of 'me first', self-promotion, crass materialism, physical appearance obsession, social media addiction, wanting to be 'famous', credit card debt, and lack of depth in relationships. This translates into a complete transformation into what is now considered 'normal' in Western society, which includes a tremendous increase in people of all ages, though especially young adults, promoting themselves continuously on social media sites, undergoing cosmetic surgery, going into lifelong debt from using credit cards beyond their financial means, and then what I consider to be the most alarming of all: posting vicious beatings and murders on videos for millions of people to watch so they become famous. (Benjamin, 2015c, p. 2)

It is exactly this context of unbridled narcissism that is inextricably connected to our society's social media addiction that I have witnessed in my university psychology and mathematics students' inappropriate and addictive use of their cell phones in my classrooms, and led to me deciding to require my psychology students to 'talk with each other' during every class session. Now at first glance it may not seem especially radical to have students simply talk with each other, but the reality is that the kind of authentic, empathic communication that Carl Rogers (1961) wrote about over a half-century ago is nowadays extremely foreign to the vast majority of our young people. As many of my psychology students conveyed in their small-group discussions, and some of them described in their third project papers,[8] they are concerned that young people no longer know how to engage socially in 'face-to-face' conversations, as they spend the dominant part of their social lives 'online'.

It has been recommended to give students information about the detrimental aspects of inappropriate cell phone use in the classroom, in the hope that they will become more aware of these negative aspects and consequently reduce their inappropriate cell phone use in the classroom (Weimer, 2014). This generic strategy was the guiding force of my choosing the topic of social media use for two of my Human Growth & Development psychology students' small-group discussion topics, and I was pleased to see that four of my students chose to write about this topic in their third project papers.[9] For the most part,

students were actively engaged in self-revealing dialogue/listening with each other in the small-group discussions in which I required them to participate, which I believe is an important humanistic antidote to the dilemma of unbridled narcissism in our society. This involved them conveying a wide variety of their personal experiences that included their intimate relationships, their parents' adjustment to their leaving home, the effects of divorce on their family life, their grandparents' ways of dealing with retirement, their transitions from high school to college, their experiences with social media and media violence, their experiences with growing up male or female, their experiences with cheating, and their experiences with death.[10]

This was complemented by each of them giving a weekly brief presentation to the whole class of material in the week's chapter that was personally meaningful to them, in which I would change the traditional seating pattern of rows into one big circle formation. Things were not perfect, as I occasionally still saw the surreptitious inappropriate use of the cell phone happening, but this now occurred much less frequently than when I was initially lecturing for longer periods, and for the last two class sessions I felt a sense of satisfaction to see that no one 'dared' to take out their cell phones during the student class presentations of their chosen topics.

For me, much of this was a sense of 'doing the right thing' for my students who were giving their class presentations, as it struck me as so rude and disrespectful for students to be engaging in social media on their cell phones while their colleagues were vulnerably giving their class presentations. I honestly do not know how much awareness most of my students had that it was 'wrong' to use their cell phones during class versus the reality that I was 'on top of this', and using their cell phones would result in a lowering of their grades. But I do think that whatever they may have thought of my 'policing' of their inappropriate cell phone use during class time, and my requiring them to actively take part in small-group class discussions every single class session, a number of them gained a valuable experience from simply 'talking with each other'. My thoughts about this are supported by my students' course evaluations from last semester, which 80% of them filled out. Some 50% or more of my students who filled out course evaluations found the course to be challenging and intellectually stimulating, that class time was used productively, and that my facilitation of discussions was deemed to be effective. They agreed that I encouraged them to share opinions and ask questions in class, and gave them helpful feedback regarding mastery of the course objectives. In comparison, less than 19 per cent of my students who filled out course evaluations did not agree with these statements. As one student commented, 'I really liked the class discussions. That was the time I got to engage in real life situations'. Thus, it is this 'talking with each other' that I believe can serve as a dominant humanistic antidote to the dual dilemma of social media addiction and narcissism.

Conclusion: creative artists' support group

To conclude my exploration of humanistic antidotes for a narcissistic social media addicted society, and obstacles that I have described above in my university psychology teaching, I will now change gears and briefly describe my work in facilitating a creative artists' support group that has met every month or two for the past three years in my local Maine community. Unlike the challenges and obstacles that I have described

above in my university psychology teaching, facilitating a creative artists' support group is something I do in a naturalistic person-centered counseling way, where the focus is very much on empathy, authenticity, creativity, personal growth, and self-actualization, modeled upon the foundations of Humanistic Psychology as described by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow (Benjamin, 2014, 2015d; Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961). Whereas the students in my university psychology classes had very little understanding of what Maslow (1962) meant by finding one's 'calling' or deepest life potential in the form of self-actualization, the participants in my creative artists' support groups are immersed in living out, or attempting to live out, their deepest life potential, in the context of their striving to become self-actualized as 'successful'[11] creative artists (Benjamin, 2008b, 2013, 2014, 2015d). This is also true for myself in the context of how I see myself as an experiential philosopher, encompassing the areas of mathematics, music, and psychology/philosophy (Benjamin, 2006).

The fliers I distribute to promote my creative artists' support groups state the following: 'A monthly support/discussion group for people interested in developing their creative artistic potentials. Find like-minded creative spirits and camaraderie in overcoming the obstacles to become a successful creative artist'.[12] There is no inappropriate cell phone or computer use at my creative artists' support groups; participants sometimes use cell phones and computers to expedite showing their artwork, writings, musical compositions, or obtaining relevant information during our discussions. The communications we have are very personal and authentic, and we listen non-judgmentally, authentically, and with empathy as we each disclose our challenges, setbacks, and successes on our creative artist paths. I have described previously some of the specifics of what the various participants, including myself, have disclosed in our group meetings (Benjamin, 2014, 2015d) about our artistic voyages. But what is most relevant for the purposes of this article is that I see my creative artists' support group as a key example of a significant humanistic antidote to the dual dilemma of social media addiction and narcissism. It is an example that, unlike my university psychology teaching, occurs in a relaxed, non-pressured atmosphere, where people come to gain personal support to actualize themselves in their chosen life as creative artists, and relate to each other in the kind of humanistic ways that Carl Rogers wrote about over a half-century ago. And it is exactly this kind of example that I believe is a powerful antidote to the detrimental aspects of social media addiction and narcissism in US society.

Notes

1. See excerpts from these four student papers in my article 'Humanistic Antidotes for Social Media/Cell Phone Addiction in the College Psychology Classroom' (Benjamin, 2016b).
2. For more information about humanistic education, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanistic_education.
3. See endnote 2.
4. See my article 'A College Psychology Teacher's Experience of Cell Phone Addiction in the Classroom: Autoethnographic Reflections' (Benjamin, 2017) for a description of the blatantly inappropriate cell phone behavior of a student who was in both my psychology and mathematics classes.
5. This cell phone cheating experience led me to engage my students in a 'Consciousness of Cheating' small-group discussion; see my article referenced in note 1 (Benjamin, 2016b) for

descriptions of this discussion and three other discussions, including social technology and media violence.
6. See the article 'Killer's Ultimate Selfie: Roanoke Horror Becoming the New Norm' in the *Washington Post*, 26 August 2015.
7. See Twenge and Campbell (2009).
8. See endnote 1.
9. See endnotes 1 and 4.
10. See endnote 4.
11. I have defined the 'successful creative artist' as follows: 'A person who has received the respect and acknowledgment of his or her work by a community of his or her peers or society-at-large, and who is also considered both psychologically and ethically to be a "well adjusted" member of his society and the greater world' (Benjamin, 2013, p. 33).
12. See endnote 6.

Notes on contributor

Elliot Benjamin has a PhD in mathematics and a PhD in psychology with a concentration in consciousness and spirituality. He is a psychology mentor/PhD committee chair at Capella University and has published four books and over 150 articles in various fields in humanistic and transpersonal psychology, pure mathematics, and mathematics enrichment. Elliot enjoys playing the piano, tennis, and ballroom dancing, and has an author's website at www.benjamin-philosopher.com.

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