

ARROGANCE - A SYNDROME OF INDIVIDUALISTIC CULTURE

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyse the ubiquity and complexity of the phenomenon of arrogance in modern society. Starting from the observation of the extent that this phenomenon has taken in the current global society, for a start, the paper attempts to identify its multiple characteristics and forms of manifestation in its first part. In the next section of this paper, the psychological substrates of arrogant behaviours are reviewed and, then in the third part, a brief portrait of the arrogant person is presented. The study continues with a comparative analysis of the causes, frequency and extent of the arrogance phenomenon in individualistic versus collectivist cultures. The paper ends with a brief reflection on the impact that arrogance has on the person who manifests or possesses it, on their relationships with others, on the community and organizations.

Keywords: arrogance, narcissism, individualistic culture, collectivist culture, impact.

1. Arrogance: an undeniable presence! The ubiquity of arrogance!

Nonchalant, lacking in discretion and tact, self-assured, arrogance displays itself nonchalantly everywhere: at the micro and macrosocial levels, in formal and informal settings. It is present in relations between states, within organizations, on the street, and in the family. We could say that it is omnipresent in contemporary society. There is no socio-professional or educational category that has developed antibodies to this virus, so we encounter it — of course in different forms, frequencies, and intensities — in politicians, businesspeople, teachers, researchers, doctors, people with modest or high levels of education, etc. One wonders whether it might not be in danger of becoming an ideal of today's Western society. In any case, it seems that modesty is no longer a widely shared value today.

An online survey conducted in the US showed that there is a high prevalence of arrogant behaviour in economically developed societies. The results of the survey showed that 84% of the subjects questioned (N = 335) claimed to have encountered arrogant behaviour in the last month and that 46% of respondents admitted that they themselves had behaved arrogantly during the same period.¹

Following a small questionnaire-based survey on perceptions of arrogance in contemporary Romanian society, in which 200 students aged 19–24 and 25–35 participated between February and March 2026, the following conclusions emerged:

- 67% of students aged 19–24 reported having encountered arrogant behaviour in the past three months, either frequently or very frequently. Master students (aged 25–35) reported the same experience at a much higher rate, namely 89%.
- students assessed the arrogant tendencies in their own behaviour with much greater leniency: only 10% admitted that they often behaved arrogantly (90% rarely or very rarely).
- more than half of the participants (60%) stated that it rarely happened that third parties discredited their ideas and labelled them as worthless without providing supporting arguments.

The vast majority of students (aged 25–35) view communication with the academic staff positively, considering that the latter demonstrates competence and intellectual modesty, rather than arrogance. They claim that it rarely, if ever, happens that some university staff ignore or underestimate their feedback regarding the topics discussed in lectures and seminars. On the other hand, we found it interesting that during a debate on the topic of arrogance, some of the students who considered themselves modest and free of arrogance became anxious and felt a pressing need to assert their superiority and dominate the debate at all costs.

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¹ Milyavsky et al., 2017, p. 2, apud Septimiu Chelcea, *Toxicitatea aroganței*, Romania socială, 28.10.2024.

Hard to ignore, arrogant people are defiant, self-sufficient, impertinent, and believe themselves to be above other people. With exaggerated self-esteem, they give themselves more importance than they truly deserve, showing contempt for others. 'In modern psychological language,' says James Hollis, 'arrogance (hybris in Greek) is called inflation.' It is so called (inflation) because it indicates the fact that we are in a state of self-deception, in which we forget our limits.²

In other words, the arrogant person is incapable of accepting and recognizing their limits, distancing themselves from obvious reality (adopting an unwise attitude). Arrogance can take many forms: financial (contempt for the poor), status (overestimating one's own status to the detriment of others), intellectual (feeling omniscient), aesthetic (overestimating one's own physical characteristics), moral (displaying moral superiority and excessive rigidity and intolerance towards alleged moral transgressions³), etc.

All forms of arrogance have in common excess, lack of moderation, lack of common sense, and ultimately, lack of wisdom. We could say that the world we live in today, although wealthier than yesterday's, is poorer in wisdom. Cumulatively, the lack of wisdom becomes harmful, contributing to the emergence of implosive phenomena at both the micro and macrosocial levels.

We could state that arrogance is a deficit of wisdom, a form of ignorance: ignoring reality, the obvious, common sense, the complexity of life, etc. It is a phenomenon captured over 2000 years ago by the so-called 'Socratic paradox.' Named by the Oracle of Delphi as the wisest man in the world, Socrates claimed that his own wisdom consisted precisely in recognizing his ignorance, stating that 'he knows that he knows nothing, and he does not even know that.' He thus distanced himself from the arrogance of those who claimed to be great scholars without having a solid foundation of knowledge. In fact, the more you know, the more you realize how little you know and how much you still have to learn. In the same vein, the wise Confucius characterized himself as 'a messenger who invented nothing but rediscovered the creations and beliefs of the past.' Combating arrogance, he advocated modesty, keeping pride under control, simplicity of habits, and measured expression.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, arrogance, or the ostentatious display of omniscience by a person, raises serious questions about their true level of knowledge and competence. The phenomenon, known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, perfectly illustrates this: people with low competence tend to overestimate their abilities and believe they know more than they actually do. In other words, from a cognitive point of view, arrogance is closely linked to the illusions people have about their own abilities.

2. Psychological perspectives on arrogance

It is necessary to analyse the psychological foundations of arrogance so as not to remain at a simplistic level of understanding and to temper any tendency to judge arrogance too harshly and marginalize arrogant people. In the Romanian collective mentality, the often-quoted saying, 'Empty vessels make the most noise,' reflects a certain accusatory intransigence and resentful intolerance toward arrogant people. This does not mean that that arrogant people are necessarily stupid!

At first glance, arrogant behaviour is hard to stomach and can cause hives. Upon closer inspection, things are more complicated. The arrogant person's air of superiority, omniscience, and omnipotence may hide low self-esteem. Nathaniel Branden argues that 'arrogance, boastfulness, and overestimation of our abilities reflect low self-esteem rather than, as some people believe, high self-esteem.'⁴

Karen Horney, a well-known Neo-Freudian psychoanalyst, noted that arrogant people have a 'neurotic need for prestige,' tending to project an image of a powerful and successful person to compensate for feelings of inferiority and fear of rejection. In this sense, arrogance is nothing more than a defensive wall, a bastion that prevents intrusion into this fragile internal territory.

Most current psychological research highlights the narcissistic core of arrogant behaviour. It intertwines excessive confidence, narcissism, and the need to display superiority. Research by W. Keith Campbell and Craig Foster (2007) has shown that grandiose narcissism invariably includes elements of arrogance, dominance, and

² James Hollis, *Căutarea sensului*, Ed. Herald, Bucharest, p. 116.

³ See Hilbig and Zettler, 2009.

⁴ Nathaniel Branden, (1998). *Self-Esteem Every Day. Reflections on Self-Esteem and Spirituality*, New York, Fireside, apud *Toxicitatea aroganței*, Romania socială, Septimiu Chelcea, 28 October 2024.

even hostility toward those who do not recognize the narcissist's superior status. Thus, arrogance is not only 'a symptom but also a tool for maintaining a grandiose self-image.'⁵

Narcissism refers to this ambivalent relationship with oneself in which self-esteem is both excessive and fragile. Under the guise of overflowing self-confidence, the arrogant person hides deep wounds related to a lack of empathy towards others and often unconscious social ignorance.

The arrogant person can be seen as a being caught in a constant search for external validation to compensate for an inner void. When the individual feels small or inadequate, the phenomenon of overcompensation occurs: they tend to display grandeur and superiority in order not to reveal their inner fragility. In practice, arrogance becomes psychological armour.

This dynamic often results in authoritarian behaviour, a tendency toward unjustified pride, and a rejection of any criticism that would jeopardize this fragile construct. 'The narcissistic behaviours of the armour, insists Winnicott in his psychoanalytic theory, are 'defensive constructions' that protect against the anxiety of psychological disintegration.'⁶

The arrogant person tends to convince himself of his superiority in order to justify his authoritarian, dominant, and sometimes abusive behaviour. This strengthens their ego, but weakens their true social bonds. The hypertrophied ego and egocentric mind overvalue individuality at the expense of recognizing otherness, establishing a vicious circle of isolation and arrogance.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between healthy self-confidence and arrogance. While the former is based on a balanced knowledge of strengths and weaknesses and the recognition of limitations, arrogance is based on the unjustified overestimation of personal qualities, the ignoring of limitations, and 'confirmation bias.'⁷

3. Portrait of the arrogant person

According to Eliza Hartley⁸, arrogant people can be easily identified. The following main characteristics outline their profile:

- They are dominant: regardless of the subject, they monopolize the discussion, are unreceptive to the opinions of others, speak in a loud tone, and overestimate their points of view.
- They reject the opinions/ solutions of others from the outset, claiming that they are unfounded and will not yield good results. Only their solutions/ opinions are valuable. To support their position, they emphatically invent all kinds of arguments, most of which are unfounded. They use a superior tone and display absolute certainty, causing others to retreat or retaliate.
- Considering themselves superior, they rarely and reluctantly accept that they are wrong, and when they do, they excuse themselves by blaming others, arousing antipathy and even revolt.
- Being self-sufficient, they lack the will and ability to listen carefully to the arguments of others. While others are speaking, they plan how to refute the evidence presented by their opponents, with what arguments, which can generate resentment, misunderstandings, and conflicts.
- They lack empathy. In their egocentricity, they are incapable of feeling the anxieties and sufferings of those around them, remaining insensitive to their problems.
- They feel the need to always be the centre of attention, to amaze their audience, to validate their exaggerated self-image.
- They always want to be right, even if the counterarguments are numerous and solid, which creates obstacles both in achieving sincere and open dialogue with others and in personal development.
- They tend to belittle others in order to exalt themselves by contrast — this being the most harmful characteristic of arrogance, according to the author mentioned above.

⁵ Stela Giurgeanu, *Masca vulnerabilității vs expresia puterii*, Dilema, 25.09.2025, <https://www.dilema.ro/tema-saptaminii/masca-vulnerabilitatii-vs-expresia-puterii>.

⁶ See <https://www.sciencedesoi.com/cles-arrogance-humaine/>, last time consulted on 11.03.2026.

⁷ Confirmation bias: the cognitive tendency to seek, interpret, favor, and retain information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions, while ignoring or minimizing contradictory evidence, which can lead us to believe that we are always right, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. This phenomenon affects judgments and decisions and can lead to polarization of opinions.

⁸ Hartley, Eliza (2024). 'People who are arrogant usually display these 8 behaviors (without realizing it)', apud Septimiu Chelcea, op. cit.

Psychiatrist Enrique Rojas presents a more succinct description of the traits of an arrogant person: 'they have an air of self-sufficiency, of not needing others, a tendency to always talk about themselves, contempt for others, an almost unhealthy sensitivity (towards those who stand out), and are incapable of having a healthy romantic relationship.'⁹

4. Arrogance as a product of individualistic culture

Arrogance is not born ex nihilo. It appears, it is maintained and promoted through certain social and cultural values and norms. There are societies that, through their culture (values, norms, traditions, beliefs, etc.), tend to promote arrogance, and societies that discourage it. In this regard, there are significant differences between collectivist, 'interdependent' societies (such as Japan) and individualistic, 'independent' societies (such as the United States).¹⁰

In individualistic cultures, professional success is central to an individual's life and self-concept (Norman Goodman, Fukuyama, 1995, 2000). Personal achievement and professional success are the measure of one's own worth. It should be noted that a person's worth tends to be measured most often by their professional success. We see here the existence of an error: identifying value with success! We encounter many situations in which success is not supported by value, and vice versa! This is an idea to which we will return.

In these societies, individual freedom and autonomy are more valued than family and groups of belonging. Individuals focus their attention on themselves and their personal well-being, paying less attention to the groups to which they belong and the collective good. The favourite saying of Americans is: 'Get up and stand out, do what you think is best for you!'¹¹ Social mobility as a value is more appreciated than stability and social cohesion.

Individualistic cultures are at the same time secularized, anthropocentric cultures: at the centre of existence is no longer God, but the autonomous, rational, free human being who tends to dominate the world. Essential changes in existential values are therefore taking place. If, before secularization, 'the human person was valued for and in itself, because it reflected the image of God,' now its value is determined by its professional success, its competitive abilities, and often its possessions. The veneration of divine reason is replaced by the veneration of human reason, representing yet another factor that contributes to the creation of a space for the manifestation of arrogance. The human person relativizes his relationship with God, even his relationship with himself and with others. They set themselves up as the Great Demiurge, emptying themselves of sacredness, forgetting in their grandeur how small they are, forgetting their ancestors, traditions, myths, etc.

Even if the phenomenon is present in most individualistic Western societies, let us take as an example the so-called American culture of the 'self-made man.' Through the ideas and principles it promotes, in fact through its entire content, it is a culture of arrogance. It claims that man is the sole architect of his own success in life, that he can achieve a certain status, financial standard, level of culture, and social position exclusively through his own efforts, without owing anything to his social origin, family, team, privileges, luck, or divinity. It is a reductionist approach that does not take into account essential factors that support or hinder an individual's success. Numerous sociological studies show that an individual's success is linked not only to their abilities, talents, and personal efforts, but also to the support they receive from their family of origin, community, and even luck.

In an individualistic and secularized world, individuals are tempted to gravitate more toward 'having' rather than 'being.' This type of culture induces the idea (through advertising, commercials, personal development books and articles, etc.) that one must own as many goods, services, life experiences, and comforts as possible, develop competitive abilities, and be successful. The individual is encouraged to be, or at least appear to be, more successful and capable than others. The individualistic materialistic paradigm does not encourage them to explore themselves, to know their abilities in order to develop themselves without comparing themselves to others. It does not encourage them to make peace with the world, but rather to conquer it by showing their superiority in their relationships with others, even when they do not have it.

We note another characteristic of this type of culture: it is a culture of short deadlines, of urgency! Under these conditions, quick results, immediate success, the shortcut, mediocre pragmatism are sought, not the joy of long searches, of deep research, of the difficult path. The important thing is that the action is successful, not

⁹ See <https://ziarulromanesc.at/4-semne-evidente-ale-unei-persoane-arogante/>, last time consulted on 11.03.2026.

¹⁰ Fatehi, Kamal; Choi, Jeongho, *International Business Management. Succeeding in a Culturally Diverse World*, Springer 2018.

¹¹ Fatehi, Kamal, *International Management: A Cross-Cultural and Functional Perspective*, Prentice Hall, 1995.

necessarily valuable! In a continuous pursuit of something as easy, fast, successful, abundant, ostentatious, comfortable, etc. as possible, individuals no longer have the time or motivation to ask themselves whether this something represents authentic value, whether it is in accordance with human nature, whether it responds to true human needs.

By emphasizing image, achievement, visibility of success, and competition, individualistic societies tend to encourage arrogant behaviour! More and more circles are beginning to appreciate the image of those who overestimate themselves, win, conquer, impose themselves, and dominate. Often confused with success and self-confidence, arrogance tends to become acceptable and even desirable. It becomes a sought-after quality, a strategy for validation and social recognition, a kind of key to success. Leaders who are self-confident, imposing, sure of their ideas and decisions, and who leave no room for questions are increasingly appreciated. Arrogant people use their attitude of superiority as a lever to climb the social ladder, to obtain or maintain status, to dominate and keep potential rivals at bay, etc. Under these circumstances, the following question arises: if this is what (individualistic, secularized, consumerist) society values, why shouldn't I be arrogant, what reason would I have to be modest, what good would it do?

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in collectivist, interdependent cultures (Japan, China, Korea), things are different. In these societies, the self is part of the common space, it is interconnected rather than differentiated. The voice of a person's conscience is the voice of their parents, teachers, mentors, etc. The main value is social connection and harmony (Norman Goodman, Francis Fukuyama, 1995, Kamal Fatehi, 2018). Social relationships are valued in themselves, not as a means of resolving personal interests. Priority is given to social stability and cohesion over freedom and social mobility. The main saying that governs social relationships in Japan is: 'The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.'

Collectivism promotes adherence to norms, group consensus, conformity, respect for authority, and elders, with group success being associated with stable and hierarchical roles. There is a genuine respect for the idea of community and collective good, which also influences the organizational model specific to these societies. For example, in Japan, corporations and their employees often establish lifelong commitments. The corporation assumes the obligation to ensure the well-being of its employees. Employees expect to spend their entire professional career with the same company. Loyalty tends to be mutual, and both parties are interested in increasing the company's efficiency. Interestingly, the unit of responsibility in the company is the work group, not the individual employee. Results are evaluated at the working group / team level, not at the individual one. This discourages unfair competition among workers, as they have an interest in achieving good results at the group / team level. If the team performs well, the good results will be distributed to all team members, each team member will be rewarded and will be proud of the common result. There is an interest for everyone to work as conscientiously as possible so that the team is as efficient as possible. The principle of showing that I am better, greater than the other no longer makes sense. It is replaced by the principle of let's support my team by performing as well as possible. Displaying superiority while belittling and despising others becomes obsolete and no longer makes any sense. Moreover, those who try to display their superiority risk being marginalized or even punished by the group to which they belong.

In these interdependent societies, the value of modesty tends to be promoted as a fundamental virtue, while displays of arrogance are discouraged or even prevented.

5. Conclusions: The impact of arrogance in society

First of all, we need to demystify arrogance: it is not self-confidence! Although they are often confused, we are talking about two distinct things. Self-confidence is accompanied by modesty (humility), while arrogance is accompanied by displays of superiority. In fact, as we showed in this paper, arrogance is an artificial posture that masks a deep vulnerability; it is a so-called golden cage from which you must learn to free yourself in order to rediscover an authentic connection with yourself and others.

Its negative effects manifest both at the level of the arrogant person and at the level of interpersonal relationships and organizations. Although arrogant people are often perceived as confident, powerful, and competent, and easily gain not only the admiration of their peers, but also power, over time they lose these advantages. Others begin to show less and less trust and respect for them, and relationships between them deteriorate.

Lacking empathy, ignoring others, displaying an air of superiority, showing contempt and insolence, arrogant people tend to generate resentment, relational conflicts, and isolate themselves from others. By favouring their own needs for exaltation and recognition, they lack the ability to build healthy relationships based on respect, comprehensive listening, and authentic dialogue. Arrogance also has harmful consequences for the arrogant person themselves; in other words, they only hurt themselves! By overcompensating and becoming intoxicated by their own grandiosity, arrogant people lose touch with reality. When faced with a difficult situation, the fall from the height of their grandiose self-perception (the illusion of their superiority) to reality is harsh, painful, and brutal.

In friendly or romantic relationships, arrogance can result in a desire to dominate or control the relationship, significantly affecting the quality of emotional exchanges. At work, it can manifest itself through authoritarian behaviour, an excessive need for recognition, and a tendency to impose oneself at the expense of colleagues. This attitude, often perceived as toxic, risks weakening team cohesion.

Arrogant leaders may dominate their teams for a while, but, ultimately, they cause resentment, low morale, division, and even the collapse of organizations. In institutions, businesses, or between nations, arrogance generates abuses of power and injustices. Along with other degenerative factors, the ubiquity of arrogance as a symptom of global society can become downright dangerous. It undermines the logic of democratic values: respect, equality, freedom and diversity of opinion, civic-mindedness, human solidarity!!!

Ultimately, what matters is not only identifying and criticizing arrogance, but also how we manage it and find possible remedies. A starting point would be how we relate to this phenomenon. Understanding that, behind the displayed superiority, there is often fear or a need for validation can help us view this behaviour with more acceptance, even empathy and lucidity. Cultivating healthy alternatives: modesty, mutual respect, goodwill, and genuine trust would be helpful.

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