

The Productive Narcissist: The Promise and Peril of Visionary Leadership

by Michael Maccoby; New York, Broadway Books, 2003, 320 pages, \$26.95

Eric D. Lister, M.D.

Michael Maccoby, a researcher in the area of leadership who is introduced as “a psychoanalyst, anthropologist, and consultant,” lays out his position and gives us some sense of his relationship with his material early in *The Productive Narcissist: The Promise and Peril of Visionary Leadership*: “The narcissistic personality, as I am defining it here, rejects how things are for how things should be.” In addition, he writes, “I want to bring about a radical new definition of the term [narcissism] and the way we think about leadership.”

Maccoby’s juxtaposition of “narcissism”—a word steeped in negative connotations—with “leadership” is pointedly designed to jar, to open our minds and force a fresh look at a much-visited topic. So far, so good. He celebrates the value of boldness, creativity, a love of freedom, a willingness to ignore convention, and the investment of one’s ideas with passionate energy. And he does so eloquently and convincingly. These traits are associated with what is perhaps Maccoby’s highest value—visionary thinking. He acknowledges as well that these same traits, in unmodulated excess, become counterproductive.

Maccoby tells us that strategic intelligence, marked by five things—foresight, systems thinking, “visioning,” motivating, and partnering—makes all the difference between productive narcissism and its pathological counterpart. These dimensions of strategic intelligence modulate and direct the raw power of narcissism, allowing its constructive expression. If this does not occur, the results are disastrous.

Although all this makes sense, and indeed has some utility in helping us think about leadership, I am at a loss as to why Maccoby feels that we need such a radical revision of the definition

of a term that has a fairly clear and useful meaning in psychiatric and psychoanalytic circles. His use of the word “narcissism” stretches to include much that is better described in the language of “ego strengths,” some behaviors that seem very much within the bipolar spectrum, and many examples of behaviors about which we do not know nearly enough to make assumptions about psychodynamics.

Nor do I understand why we are asked to embrace a new typology of personality (divided into the categories of erotic, marketing, narcissistic, and obsessive). To my mind, this is sloppy psychology, and if the intent is to make the sometimes abstruse concepts of one discipline (psychology) available to another (business), much is sacrificed and little gained in the effort. Maccoby’s discussions of strategic intelligence lay out a number of useful capacities (forethought) and techniques (partnering) that serve to make any leader successful, regardless of the strengths and weaknesses of his or her personality. These points need no new psychology.

Maccoby is most interesting when hypothesizing about the interplay of social forces and leadership behaviors. He believes that the social, economic, or political upheaval increases the cultural demand for someone with charismatic personal power—in his terms, a narcissist. The risk, of course, is that either society selects a forceful leader who is inadequately bolstered by strategic intelligence, or the narcissist, unchecked, drifts away from self-restraint and becomes unbounded in appetite and ambition. In more stable environments, Maccoby suggests, there is less social appetite for someone who is eager to take on and reinvent convention.

If these are, for this reviewer, Maccoby’s more thought-provoking contributions, most troubling is his need to advance his ideas about productive

narcissism at the expense of first misrepresenting, and then devaluing, the contributions of others—Jim Collins, particularly. Of course, all’s fair in the marketplace of competing ideas, but Collins, in *Good to Great* (1), has interesting lessons to teach from his study of a much more humble approach to leadership, lessons that deserve more than dismissal.

Interestingly, Maccoby, Collins, and I each place high value on visionary leadership, including the capacity to think boldly, hold views passionately, and challenge convention. I do not believe, however, that we gain very much by equating this with narcissism, or by Maccoby’s typology of personality. Rather than this particular text, I would steer students of visionary leadership to the old masters in psychology, drama, and fiction—where the nuanced alchemy of personality, social context, and that which we call leadership is laid bare.

Reference

1. Collins J: *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . And Others Don't*. New York, HarperBusiness, 2001

The Hillside Diary and Other Writings

by Robert Gary Neugeboren; Boston, Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 2004, 208 pages, \$17.95 softcover

Jeffrey L. Geller, M.D., M.P.H.

Robert Gary Neugeboren, the author of *The Hillside Diary and Other Writings*, is a Brooklyn native who was born in 1943. He is the brother of Jay Neugeboren, who portrayed Robert in the book *Imagining Robert* (1), which described Robert’s 30-year history of mental illness. The two brothers are portrayed in a documentary film by the same name.

The Hillside Diary and Other

Dr. Geller is professor of psychiatry and director of public-sector psychiatry at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester.

Dr. Lister is managing partner at Ki Associates in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Writings has four parts. The first is an introduction written by Jay, and the remaining three parts, written by Robert, constitute the diary itself—a collection of letters written between 1958 and 1976 and a collection of poems.

The part that covers the period between April 3 and May 15, 1962, which is titled “The Hillside Diary,” is the least interesting of the three parts. The reader is told to expect a diary that provides insight into care and treatment in the 1960s. I thought the diary failed to do so. It reads much more like an almost blow-by-blow portrayal of a dreary life described in exquisite detail, including what Robert ate for meals, whom he did or did not talk to, and what activities he participated in. Unfortunately, and much to my disappointment, Robert’s account of his own life in state hospitals is much less interesting than his brother’s account of the same thing.

The poems capture more of the spirit, sensitivity, and disappointment of an individual whose early life was one of talent, productivity, and prospect and whose adult life has been spent mostly in psychiatric hospitals, supervised residences, and mental health programs. Rather than try to capture the essence of Robert’s poems, here I quote one called “Well Winter Is Over”:

well winter is over/ the buds now on
the trees/ a lot of good it does to me/
I still seem to suffer/ from the fate of
loneliness/ and where is the tender
touching princess?/ after whom I
seek/ is it that I’m too meek?/ trem-
bling and empty/ for years now I’ve
been floating/ like the sea/ rolling and
moving/ going no place/ but going all
the time.

The letters are a set of about three dozen chosen from hundreds of letters exchanged between the Neugeboren brothers. The earliest letter is from 1958, the latest from 1976. The letters are a stunning portrayal of an individual’s struggle not to be totally consumed by his chronic mental illness. They begin before Robert’s first psychotic episode and carry for-

ward for another decade and a half. Robert writes with a mixture of humor and pathos but always seems to be a keen observer. In a letter from 1969, he writes “the pills are working fine and much more fun than making up stories for doctors and pseudo doctors. I am repulsed by all the talking that I once did and really don’t know what I talked about and how those ‘professionals’ could sit there and listen but then I guess when you’re getting paid at the rates that they are you can sit.” To anyone who has talked to patients in state hospitals, some of Robert Neugeboren’s laments will be quite familiar—for example, “I’m really feeling much better but at the present rate of progress it seems like I’ll be here forever.”

Throughout the book are photographs, drawings by Robert Neugeboren, and reproductions of actual letters and envelopes.

I knew this book was coming, and I was rooting for Robert Neugeboren, hoping his own presentation of himself would surpass his older brother’s. Unfortunately, it does not. A much better sense of Robert and his struggles comes from Jay Neugeboren’s presentation in *Imagining Robert* than from Robert Neugeboren’s presentation in *The Hillside Diary and Other Writings*.

Reference

1. Neugeboren J: *Imagining Robert: Brothers, Madness, and Survival: A Memoir*. New York, William Morrow, 1997

Handbook of Self and Identity

edited by Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney;
New York, Guilford Press, 2002, 703 pages, \$75

Stephen M. Thielke, M.D.

Handbook of Self and Identity is dynamite. It compiles and synthesizes research about the self, broadly defined as the reflective capacity of humans to be, in William James’ original typology, both “I” and “me,” subject and object, knower and known. The contributors are mainly research psychologists (none is a physician) presenting findings from the past 30 years. The discipline of self research challenges the hegemony that behaviorism has held for the past century. I believe it has deeper roots (in humanism and philosophy), stouter branches (of validated research), and choicer fruit (in clinical and personal relevance) than behaviorism. It stops short of blowing behaviorism away, but it certainly shakes its foundation.

As a psychiatry resident, I am exposed to many psychodynamic, cognitive, and behavioral theories, but I have never encountered anything like

this material. It took me a while to adapt to a different vocabulary and conceptual framework in reading this book, but I soon found these theories to be well-researched, consistent, and profoundly relevant. Roughly, they address how we see ourselves and others, what motivates us, and how our behaviors and thoughts affect and are affected by our reflective capacities. These are heady and philosophical issues, but psychological research has elucidated them brilliantly, often with counterintuitive findings. Unlike much of the other theory I am learning as a resident, this material has sprung from and withstood the test of empirical research.

Although several chapters address personality disorders, the book has virtually no clinical content, much less discussion of how to carry out therapy. Yet almost every finding relates uncannily to the issues my patients bring to sessions. I found the chapters on self-evaluation, self-knowledge, self-systems, and emotions particularly meaningful in helping me understand what my patients

Dr. Thielke is a third-year resident in psychiatry at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle.