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Dear Editor,

Narcissism, pretention and normal

We were sitting in Albert Park, Auckland, New Zealand. A passer-by wearing striking clothing in the latest fashion, stood with head held high, made quick, dramatic movements, spoke and laughed loudly and called and waved to a colleague who had fallen behind. This was considered excessive – one of us called it ‘narcissistic’ and the other, ‘pretentious’ behavior. Which was correct?

Narcissism is defined in the standard English dictionary: “extreme admiration for oneself or one’s own attributes; self-love”. The term is derived from the name of a handsome youth of Greek mythology who was deeply in love with his own appearance. The word was first used in English by the poet Samuel Coleridge in 1822.

Pretentious is described in the standard English dictionary as “making and exaggerated outward show; ostentatious” and “the assumption of dignity or importance”. Pretentious is the adjective of ‘pretend’ which is “to venture or attempt falsely to do something”. Pretend is from Latin *preaetendere* ‘put forward’.

In short, underpinning narcissism is the individual’s belief they possess characteristics superior to those of others. Underpinning pretention is a plan to pretend to possess superior characteristics, with a view to gaining an advantage (as does the confidence trickster). Thus, without knowing more about the individual, the passing observer cannot with certainty use either of these words.

But, one of us was a Child of the Sixties and the other a citizen of Kuwait – a land of Islam and Expatriates. Culture refers to the set of common values and goals, and customs refers to the common way of responding to circumstances of the people of a region.

In the sixties the young people wore flares (trousers with very wide cuffs) decorated with flowers – they listened to folk music and smoked cigarettes. The current young people of the West have different values, they ride bicycles and contact each other using their computers. Many of the young people of Auckland have roots in Asia or Polynesian traditions, many of the young people of Kuwait have been influenced by Mesopotamian and Ottoman history and have access to greater wealth than most other young people of the world.

So, the observed behaviour might be neither narcissistic nor pretentious – it could be normal. To decide, not only would we need a full knowledge of the mental life of the individual, but also, close acquaintance with the local culture of the time.

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