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It's all about me

Individualism has fostered a culture of self-pitying victimhood. Instead of whingeing, look outside yourself, join forces and get fighting



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guardian.co.uk, Tuesday September 30 2008 13:00 BST

It used to be that only oppressed minorities had the right to lay claim to victim status, but not any more: it seems that anyone and everyone can be a victim now. Forget the Oppression Olympics, the pointless debate over which identity group suffers the most discrimination; these days, as Frank Furedi noted in *The Culture of Fear*: "We are all expected to compete, like guests on a television programme, to prove that we are the most put-upon and pathetic people in the house, the most deserving of counselling and compensation."

It was Margaret Thatcher who inadvertently provided the catalyst for all this navel-gazing and self-obsession when she famously pronounced that there is "no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first." Since then it's all been about "me me me"; not even 11 years of a Labour government have managed to halt our increasing narcissism or inject any sense of collectivism back into the national psyche.

Bookshop shelves groan with the weight of self-help manuals, designed to pander to and heal just about every psychic and emotional stress known to humankind, while misery lit (or misery porn as it's more accurately known) is fast outselling any other genre.

As writers scribe in unflinching detail their stories of brutalised childhoods, and of their survivals against all the odds, we lap up these tales of woe and clamour for more. Narratives that were meant to inspire and empower us with their messages of triumph over adversity serve instead as fodder for our most voyeuristic tendencies; it's starting to feel like there's an incredibly tasteless competition on to find the poor sod who has had the most miserable childhood in the history of the world, ever.

But as Libby Brooks observed recently in her excellent piece on the debate about rape: "Creating a hierarchy of victimhood helps no one." I couldn't agree more.

Even those with all the advantages aren't exempt from all this wallowing and internal reflection. Born with a silver spoon in your mouth and sent to all the best schools? Don't worry, there's a support group out there for you somewhere. Think you've always been happy and never wanted for anything? Well think again. No one gets through life unscathed: you're probably in denial and need a good dose of therapy to find out whatever it is you're repressing.

The recent furore over Harriet Harman's equality bill proposals was a perfect illustration of how even the most privileged among us are now getting in on the act. Threatened with having to compete against women and ethnic minorities for jobs they would normally regard as theirs by right, some men have, ever since the bill was announced, been squealing louder than stuck pigs. "It's not fair!" they complain as they watch their unearned privileges ebbing away. "I'm being discriminated against! Now I'm a victim too."

Really? Then welcome to the club. It's getting a bit crowded in here isn't it?

What's really lacking in all of this introspection is any sense of the bigger picture; all political perspective seems to have been lost. These personal histories stand alone, testament to the individualism that has permeated every aspect of 21st-century life. Rather than examining and critiquing our social conditions, we're encouraged instead to look inwards, to heal ourselves and rid ourselves of any demons we may have picked up along the way. As a consequence of this we're failing to make those vital connections between our personal experiences and how our lives have been shaped by forces beyond our individual control.

But "the personal is political" was not just some trite feminist slogan dreamed up to help bored housewives make sense of their lot. As Carol Hanisch said in her essay (pdf) of the same name: "personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution." Isn't it about time we started to embrace that kind of thinking again?

The discriminations and prejudices I've encountered in my life are not because I'm me, Cath Elliott: they're a direct result of the gender and social class I was born into. Counselling, self-help books or holistic therapies might make me better able to deal with what life has thrown or has yet to throw at me, but it won't do anything to change the external conditions that impact negatively on me and mine.

As Elayne Rapping says in *The Culture of Recovery*: "By itself, therapy can only do so much in a world in which material conditions and differences do indeed have an impact on consciousness and emotional experience. One can "get one's life in order" as best one can, through therapy, self-help, and so on. But that life will still be lived in a context of social reality which therapy, alone, does not address, except indirectly. More, and different, activities are needed."

So, the choice is ours. We can either continue to wallow in our victimhood, fighting to outdo each other with our tales of oppression and woe, and attempting to heal our lives in splendid isolation, or we can learn once again to recognise our shared experiences and start to fight together for change. We're only victims if we choose to be so. Personally I reject the label: I'd advise everyone else to do the same.

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