

# The Evidence for Generation We and Against Generation Me

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article addresses the question of whether today's emerging adults are excessively "narcissistic" as claimed by Jean Twenge and others. The answer is a decisive "no." There is no persuasive evidence that scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) have risen among college students in recent decades. In any case, the NPI is a dubious measure of narcissism, and college students are a dubious sample of emerging adults. There is evidence that today's emerging adults have high expectations and are confident in their abilities, but these qualities should be seen as psychological resources during a life stage that is often difficult. If it were true that their narcissism was rising and that narcissism leads to impulsive behavior, then impulsive behavior would also be rising, but in fact it is diminishing across multiple indicators. As a society, we can and should do more to support emerging adults, beginning with a halt to the negative stereotypes.

## Keywords

health behavior, well-being, self esteem, antisocial behavior, anxiety

In the course of the 20 years I have been interviewing and writing about emerging adults, I have often been puzzled and troubled by the many negative stereotypes that have collected around them. Books are written about them with hostile, sneering titles such as *The Dumbest Generation* and *Slouching Toward Adulthood*. When I talk to people about my research, the most common question is some version of "What is wrong with them?"

Of course, bashing the young is old tradition (Arnett, 2008). From Aristotle's time to Shakespeare's to our own, adults have lamented the deficiencies of the rising generation and deplored their inadequacy for taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. These laments are not entirely without foundation, given that, in most times and places, it is the young who are the source of the most crime, sexual misbehavior, and other behavior that is disruptive to the functioning of society (Arnett, 1999). However, what makes the volume of the current complaints especially puzzling is that it is so out of sync with the reality of young people's lives. As I will explain here, across a wide range of indicators, the behavior of young people has become better, not worse, over the past 20 years. Nevertheless, the complaints continue, along with claims that they are worse than ever.

Jean Twenge's research and writings have been at the forefront of today's complaints about young people. In her book *Generation Me* (Twenge, 2006) and in a series of research articles, Twenge has sought to advance the thesis that today's emerging adults are exceptionally selfish, even "narcissistic" (Twenge & Campbell, 2001, 2010; Twenge & Foster, 2010; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Due to the indulgent attitudes of their parents, who were bred in the era of 1960s and '70s when the self-esteem movement was in

its heyday, today's emerging adults experienced a childhood in which they were rarely scolded for misbehavior, and every kid on the soccer team received a trophy, regardless of performance. Consequently, goes Twenge's thesis, they reached emerging adulthood with their self-esteem inflated to the point of narcissism, with disastrous consequences for themselves and their society.

Twenge deserves credit for delivering a well-deserved skewering to the excesses of the self-esteem movement (although she is hardly the first to do so). I agree entirely with her assertion that self-control is a stronger predictor than self-esteem of outcomes such as higher educational attainment and lower substance use. However, I disagree with her claims about emerging adults, in particular their alleged narcissism. I do not believe the evidence supports her views that today's emerging adults are fundamentally selfish as a consequence of overindulgent parenting and consequently pose a danger to society and to their own futures. On the contrary, my view is directly opposite: that today's emerging adults are not Generation Me but Generation We, an exceptionally generous generation that holds great promise for improving the world.

Our debate centers around three questions.

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## Is Narcissism—An Inflated Sense of Self—Increasing Among Emerging Adults?

In her book and in many published articles, the focus of Twenge's research has been on presenting evidence purported to show an increase in narcissism among emerging adults in recent decades. As the basis of this assertion, she has conducted meta-analyses on studies of college students that include the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Twenge & Foster, 2010). She has also examined cohort patterns in college students' self-esteem (Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). However, there are several reasons to question Twenge's evidence, specifically (1) the dubious validity of the NPI as a measure of narcissism; (2) Twenge's reliance on college student samples to represent all emerging adults, and (3) contradictory data showing little or no rise in narcissism or self-esteem.

### *Does the NPI really measure narcissism?*

The NPI is a 40-item questionnaire. Some of the items have clear face validity as assessments of narcissism, such as "I like to show off my body" and "If I ruled the world it would be a better place." In contrast, other items seem well within the range of normal personality and may even be considered to reflect desirable traits, such as "I am assertive" and "I like to take responsibility for making decisions." The increase in scores on the NPI over several decades that Twenge reports is small, amounting to only an item or two (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2009). So, which items are responsible for the increase, the items showing psychopathology or the items showing normal or even optimal traits? Because Twenge's analyses use the total scale, there is no way to tell. One analysis that examined NPI subscales did not support Twenge's thesis (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008a).

Notably, there is a gender difference in patterns of scores on the NPI over recent decades, with studies that compare males and females showing an increase only for females (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008b; Twenge et al., 2008). Gender roles have also changed in recent decades, with young females increasing on traditionally "masculine" personality traits such as assertiveness (Choi, Fuqua, & Newman, 2008; Twenge, 1997). So, the increase in narcissism Twenge reports among females could simply reflect changes in gender roles, with young women today more likely to be assertive and self-confident than in the past.

### *Do college students adequately represent emerging adults?*

Twenge's data on emerging adults combine studies of college students over several decades. She then presents the results as conclusions about all "young Americans" (Twenge, 2006). However, college students are not representative of emerging adults more generally. They are wealthier, whiter, and (by definition) more highly educated than their noncollege peers.

Furthermore, the studies used by Twenge are not representative even of college students. Although 70% of young Americans enter higher education the year after graduating from high school, half of these attend community colleges or vocational training programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Twenge's data are drawn entirely from the college students who attend 4-year colleges and who represent only 20% of all young Americans aged 18–25 (Trzesniewski et al., 2008b).

### *Have narcissism scores really increased?*

Even if we were to accept that the NPI is a valid measure of narcissism, and even if we were to accept that college students can be taken to represent all emerging adults, there would still be reason to doubt Twenge's conclusion that narcissism has increased among young Americans in recent decades. Other researchers who have examined her analyses of trends among college students have disputed her results and have reached different conclusions in their own analyses.

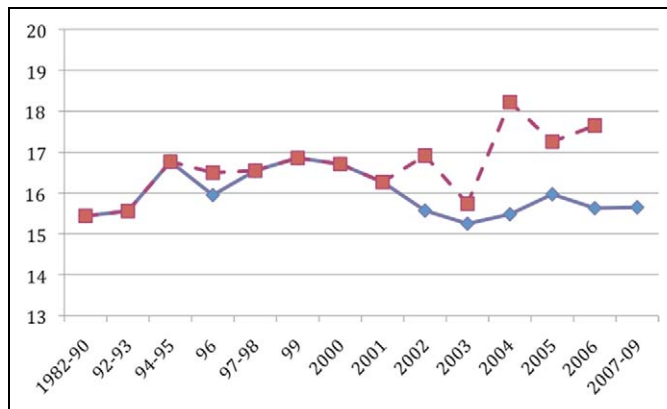
The critique of Twenge's claims of growing narcissism among college students has been led by Kali Trzesniewski and Brent Donnellan. In a series of papers, they have carefully examined each of Twenge's analyses, and each time concluded that Twenge's claims for her data are unmerited (Donnellan et al., 2009; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Trzesniewski et al., 2008a, 2008b). Trends in narcissism, self-esteem, and self-enhancement among college students are flat over several decades, according to their analyses.

For example, Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins (2008a) examined patterns in self-esteem from 1976 to 2005, using data from the Monitoring the Future Project, a large annual survey that is representative of American high school seniors. Self-esteem is a particularly apt choice, given Twenge's (2006) claims that the basis of the narcissism of today's college students is the inflated self-esteem they developed in the course of childhood. However, the analysis by Trzesniewski et al. (2008a) showed no increase in self-esteem from the mid-1970s to the present.

Other investigators have reached similar conclusions. Most notably, Roberts, Edmonds, and Grijalva (2010) reexamined the conclusions presented in Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, and Bushman (2008) of secular trends among college students on the NPI. The analyses by Roberts et al. (2010) included additional studies that were not part of the Twenge et al. (2008) analysis. A comparison of the two studies is shown in Figure 1. The Twenge et al. analysis showed a slight rise from 1982–90 to 2006 (although only slight; scores as of 2003 were little different from scores of 1982–90). However, the analysis by Roberts et al. (2010) showed no increase at all.

## Is an Inflated Sense of Self Good or Bad in Emerging Adulthood? Is There a Point at Which It Becomes Too High, and If So, How Can That Point Be Identified?

Although narcissism and self-esteem among American emerging adults do not appear to have changed over the past



**Figure 1.** Cohort changes on narcissism as measured by the NPI, Roberts et al. (2010) (diamonds) and Twenge et al. (2008) (squares).

several decades, it seems clear that emerging adulthood is a time when optimism is especially high. In the recent national Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults (CUPEA) I directed, 83% of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed with the statement, “At this time of my life it still seems like anything is possible,” and 89% agreed that “I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life” (Arnett & Schwab, 2013).

Even narcissism, as measured by the NPI, may be higher in emerging adulthood than in other adult life stages. Roberts et al. (2010) examined patterns of scores on the NPI in the course of adulthood. They found that NPI scores were highest of all during emerging adulthood and concluded that “every generation is Generation Me, as every generation of young people is more narcissistic than their elders” (p. 97). Of course, this conclusion must be interpreted in light of the concerns about the validity of the NPI as a measure of narcissism. Nevertheless, it appears to be broadly true that young Americans have high expectations for life and high hopes that those expectations will eventually bear fruit. On this point, I believe Twenge and I can agree.

However, a crucial point of disagreement immediately follows, regarding the implications and consequences of emerging adults’ high expectations. Twenge’s thesis is not just that high expectations (narcissism) are high in emerging adulthood, but that the consequences of these high expectations are ruinous for emerging adults and for society. Specifically, Twenge claims that an inflated sense of self in emerging adulthood can be linked to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression as well as to poor relationships, impulsive, and irresponsible sexual behavior, and a lack of concern with the problems of society as a whole (Twenge, 2006). Yet the evidence on anxiety and depression is mixed at best, and the evidence on relationships and behavior is overwhelmingly against Twenge’s thesis.

Twenge (2006) claims that anxiety and depression have increased in recent cohorts of children, adolescents, and emerging adults. However, other evidence calls this claim into question (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). A meta-analysis

of epidemiological studies of depression over the last 30 years reported no changes in prevalence of depression in childhood and adolescence (Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006). Epidemiological studies focusing on emerging adults have not been conducted, except on college student samples, which are suspect for the reasons mentioned above.

Nevertheless, even if the evidence does not support Twenge’s claim that anxiety and depression have increased in childhood and adolescence, I agree with Twenge that emerging adulthood is a stage of life when anxiety and depression are high. In the national CUPEA survey of 18- to 29-year-olds conducted in 2012, 56% agreed with the statement “I often feel anxious” and 32% agreed that “I often feel depressed” (Arnett & Schwab, 2013). However, in the same survey, 83% of emerging adults agreed that “This time of my life is fun and exciting.” Clearly, emerging adulthood is an emotionally complicated life stage.

There is an additional question as to the sources of emerging adults’ widespread anxiety and depression, and here Twenge and I see it differently. She attributes their anxiety and depression to the self-esteem that was overinflated during their childhood years, leading inevitably to deflation once their dreams collide with reality in emerging adulthood. As she states in *Generation Me*, “Our growing tendency to put the self first leads to unparalleled freedom, but it also creates an enormous amount of pressure on us to stand alone . . . Generation Me has been taught to expect more out of life at the very time when good jobs and nice houses are increasingly difficult to obtain. All too often, the result is crippling anxiety and crushing depression” (Twenge, 2006, p. 109).

My view is that anxiety and depression in emerging adulthood are not a consequence of inflated self-esteem earlier in development but of the identity struggles that are a normal part of the emerging adulthood life stage, in love and work (Arnett, 2004). In the course of the 20s, most young Americans find a life partner with whom to form a committed relationship, usually culminating in marriage, but in the course of finding that partner they make and break a series of relationships. They also have periods when they have no partner. It is not surprising that the ups and downs of their love lives would be accompanied by emotions of anxiety and depression. Similarly, their efforts to find satisfying work involve changing jobs often, an average of seven times from age 20 to 29. Unemployment rates among 16- to 24-year-olds are consistently twice as high as the overall rate. Each new job may provoke anxiety, as may each jobless period; losing a job, or working in an unpromising, low-paying job may provoke feelings of depression.

The high expectations and optimism of emerging adults, far from being a bane to themselves or society, are actually a psychological resource during what is often a stressful and difficult time of life (cf. Bjorklund, 1997). Because they are making their way toward building the foundation of an adult life and trying possibilities that often do not work out well for them and require them to try something else, they are frequently knocked down in the course of their 20s. Their optimism, their self-belief, is what enables them to get up and try again (Arnett, 2004).

If self-esteem in emerging adulthood is a psychological asset for most of them, is there a point at which it becomes too high for some? No doubt there is a point at which high self-esteem becomes egocentrism or even narcissism. However, a threshold point is impossible for psychology to identify with precision. Psychological measures do not possess such exactness.

The question could be addressed more successfully if applied to this generation of emerging adults as a whole. Specifically, is the self-esteem of today's emerging adults so high that it becomes selfishness or narcissism for many of them and consequently causes problems for themselves and for society? This is the question that Twenge answers affirmatively in her work; hers is an indictment of an entire *generation*. With regard specifically to narcissism, Twenge asserts that there are "hundreds of studies showing that the NPI predicts an array of negative outcomes, from aggression after threat to lack of empathy" (2008, p. 684). If narcissism has increased in recent decades among emerging adults, and if it is true that narcissism predicts "an array of negative outcomes," then these negative outcomes should be abundantly evident in the lives of today's emerging adults.

However, the evidence overwhelmingly contradicts her declaration. If Twenge's claim were true, the results of it would be evident in the behavior of today's emerging adults. They would exhibit rising rates of impulsive, risky behavior, because they would lack adequate self-control and they would feel entitled to any impulsive pleasure they might wish to pursue. They would exhibit low rates of empathy for others and do little to help anyone other than themselves, because they would be trapped in the cocoon of their narcissism.

In direct contradiction to Twenge's claims, rates of risk behavior have undergone a remarkable decline in the past 20 years over a wide range of behaviors. At the same time, emerging adults today show unprecedented acceptance for people who are different from themselves and are participating in community service at record high rates.

The decline in risk behavior applies to automobile driving, teen pregnancy, and crime. Automobile fatalities among 16- to 24-year-olds declined by almost half from 1990 to 2009 (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA], 2011). Because risky driving behavior is a principal cause of accidents among young drivers, it can be inferred that their driving behavior is more responsible and less impulsive today than it was 20 years ago. Rates of pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth among 15- to 19-year-olds also declined by nearly half from 1990 to 2010 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011; National Center for Health Statistics, 2012). This implies that young people today are more responsible and less impulsive in their sexual behavior than they were 20 years ago. With regard to crime, the same pattern of decline-by-half over the past 20 years applies to property crimes (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2011). Violent crime has decreased as well, by about one third. Criminologists have long identified impulsiveness as a major contributor to criminal behavior (Cross, Copping, & Campbell,

2011), so the decline in crime implies a decline in impulsiveness among the young.

Not only have negative behaviors decreased but positive behaviors have increased. According to the annual national survey of tens of thousands of college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, 84% reported volunteering within the past year in 2008, the highest level ever and up steadily from 66% in 1990 (Pryor et al., 2008; Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). Furthermore, attitudes toward persons of different ethnicities and sexual orientations are more tolerant and accepting among young people today than among older generations (Zogby, 2008). For example, in a national sample 50% of 18- to 29-year-olds approved of legalizing gay marriage, a higher percentage than in any older age group (Pew Research Center, 2010). It seems reasonable to conclude that young people today are better, not worse, at taking the perspective of persons who are different than themselves, compared to their elders, and consequently less, not more, egocentric or narcissistic.

In sum, the evidence overwhelmingly shows that the self-esteem and self-belief of today's emerging adults is not "too high" by any reasonable reckoning. If it were, the consequences would be evident in high and increasing rates of selfish attitudes and impulsive behavior. Instead, emerging adults have been shown to be less selfish and impulsive in their attitudes and behavior than they were 20 years ago. They are a generation that should be commended for the improvements in their behavior and heralded for their promise in creating a more generous and accepting society. For Twenge to slander them instead as selfish, impulsive, and narcissistic is patently inaccurate and deeply unfair.

### **How, If at All, Should We Change Our Culture (Parenting, Teaching, and Media) to Benefit the Next Generation of Emerging Adults?**

Given all the favorable trends in young people's attitudes and behavior over the past 20 years, whatever we have been doing in our socialization of children, we should keep doing it. Clearly, it is working well. They are growing into emerging adults who are less likely than in the past to participate in risk behaviors that endanger the health and well-being of themselves and others, as well as more likely to be accepting of people who are unlike themselves and to engage in community service. Despite Twenge's claims of the doom and gloom that should result from the supposedly inflated self-esteem of today's emerging adults, there is no evidence whatsoever that their functioning is worse than in the past.

However, this does not mean we should be complacent. One specific policy we can advocate is to broaden the range of opportunities for emerging adults to express their generosity and their desire to help others and improve society. Community service organizations such as the Peace Corps and Americorps are currently experienced record numbers of applications from

emerging adults. However, their capacity has not expanded along with their applications, and they can only accept about 10% of the young people who apply. This means that many emerging adults lose an opportunity to serve, and the people whom they would serve lose as well. The capacity of these organizations should be multiplied so that all the emerging adults who wish to serve and who possess adequate skills for the service required are able to do so. The benefits would be substantial, for emerging adults and the world.

The other step that can be taken for the benefit of emerging adults is to stop promoting negative stereotypes about them, that they are selfish, lazy, and worse than ever. These false claims are harmful, not only because they are false and therefore unfair but because they discourage adult society from supporting the programs that would give emerging adults a broader range of opportunities for education, work, and service. It is time to retire the damaging and false stereotypes and instead celebrate today's emerging adults for the extraordinary generation they are.

### Author's Note

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### Author Biography

**Jeffrey Jensen Arnett** is a research professor at Clark University. He is the author of *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (Oxford University Press) and the Founding President of the Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA; [www.ssea.org](http://www.ssea.org)).

# The Evidence for Generation Me and Against Generation We

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## Abstract

According to the empirical evidence, today's emerging adults (Millennials/GenY, born after 1980) are more Generation Me than Generation We when compared to previous generations. Five data sets show a generational increase in narcissism, including one that demonstrates significant increases when a confound is controlled. College and child samples increase in self-esteem over the generations. Some high school samples show no change, though high school students increasingly embrace other overly positive self-views. In nationally representative samples of high school and college students, values have shifted toward extrinsic (money, fame, and image) concerns and away from intrinsic (community, affiliation) concerns. These trends have mostly negative consequences, such as lower empathy, less concern for others, and less civic engagement (e.g., interest in social issues, government, and politics). Parents and teachers should focus on teaching children and adolescents the values of hard work and consideration for others instead of an inflated sense of self.

## Keywords

generation, technology, spirituality, communication, future orientation

A time traveler from the American 1950s would barely recognize her nation today. Most mothers of young children work outside the home, racial prejudice is unfashionable, 40% of babies are born to unmarried women, and technology allows instant access to vast amounts of information. In response to (or because of) these changes and others, several authors have observed that American culture has become more individualistic (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007; Fukuyama, 1999; Myers, 2000). Empirical support for these observations has begun to accumulate. For example, television shows aimed at young adolescents now focus more on fame (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011), popular song lyrics are more narcissistic and antisocial (DeWall, Pond, Campbell, & Twenge, 2011), and books use more individualistic language (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012).

Has growing up in a culture radically different from that of their parents and grandparents in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s had any effect on the self-views, attitudes, and behavior of today's emerging adults?

An overwhelming amount of evidence suggests that it has. At base, generational differences are cultural differences: As cultures change, their youngest members are socialized with new and different values (for a summary, see *Generation Me*: Twenge, 2006).

Question 1: Is Narcissism—An Inflated Sense Of Self—Increasing Among Emerging Adults?

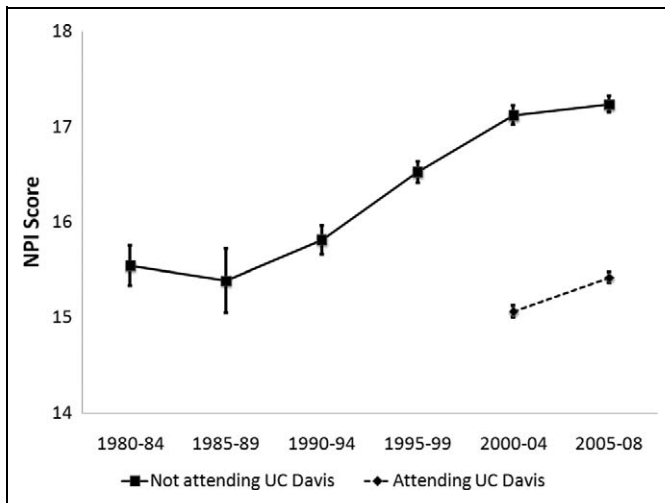
## Increases in Narcissistic Personality Traits and Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)

Narcissism is a very positive, inflated view of the self. As a personality trait among the normal population, narcissism correlates positively with self-esteem, a desire for uniqueness, and values such as vanity and materialism (for reviews, see Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Those who choose more narcissistic statements on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) are more likely to seek attention, have unrealistic expectations for the future, become angry and aggressive when threatened, take more resources for themselves and leave less for others, and value money, fame, and image over family, helping others, and community (e.g., Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissism has some benefits, such as for public performance (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002), but the consequences for other people are almost uniformly negative, and benefits for the self are short-lived (for a review, see Campbell, Hoffman, Campbell, & Marchisio, 2011). Thus, narcissism is not just confidence; it

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**Figure 1.** Mean Narcissistic Personality Inventory scores 1982–2009 for students either attending UC Davis or not. Capped vertical bars denote  $\pm 1$  SE. Adapted from Twenge and Foster (2010).

is overconfidence and is linked to negative interpersonal outcomes.

Five data sets show more narcissism among recent generations of young people compared to their predecessors. Four of these data sets compare recent college students with those from previous decades. Because these samples are of the same age, any differences must be due to generation or time period and not due to age. First, a meta-analysis found an increase of a third of a standard deviation in American college students' NPI scores between 1982 and 2009 (Twenge & Foster, 2010; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Twice as many students answered the majority of the items in the narcissistic direction in 2009 versus 1982. Second, students from the University of South Alabama scored 0.37 SDs higher on the NPI in 2009 compared to 1994 (Twenge & Foster, 2010). Third, college students scored higher on the narcissism items of the California Psychological Inventory in 2008 compared to 1986 (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010). The fourth data set, of students from two University of California (UC) campuses, initially showed no change in narcissism (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008). However, the 1982 and 1996 samples were from UC Berkeley and the 2002–2007 samples from UC Davis, completely confounding campus and time. Because UC Davis students score unusually low in narcissism and comprised all of the recent samples, this suppressed the increase in narcissism over time (Twenge & Foster, 2010). Within campus at UC Davis, NPI scores increased between 2002 and 2007 at the same yearly rate found in the nationwide meta-analysis (Twenge & Foster, 2008). An analysis combining the nationwide data with the UC Davis data was also significant after controlling for campus (Twenge & Foster, 2010). Figure 1 displays the increase in NPI scores among UC Davis students and the nationwide sample.

The fifth data set examined NPD, the more severe, clinical form of the trait. Researchers at the National Institutes of Health asked a nationally representative sample of over

35,000 American adults whether they had ever experienced certain symptoms during their lifetimes and then examined whether the symptom pattern fit the diagnosis of NPD. Compared to those over 65 years old (3.2% of whom had had NPD at some point), nearly three times as many respondents in their 20s (9.4%) had already experienced NPD (Stinson et al., 2008). If the rates of NPD were constant over the generations, *more* older people would report experience with NPD, because they had many more years in which to develop the disorder. This again suggests a generational increase in narcissism.

Overly positive self-views are also more common. In a nationally representative sample of 7 million college students of 1966–2010, recent students were more likely to see themselves as above average in agentic areas such as academic ability, drive to achieve, and leadership ability (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012). This was not due to actual improvements in performance, as standardized test scores were either unchanged or down, as was time spent studying. More recent generations also have markedly higher expectations for future educational and professional attainments even though the actual attainment of these goals has not changed (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006). For example, nearly 60% of 2010 high school students expect to attain a graduate or professional degree—twice as many as in 1976. Yet the percentage who actually attained such a degree, about 9%, did not change.

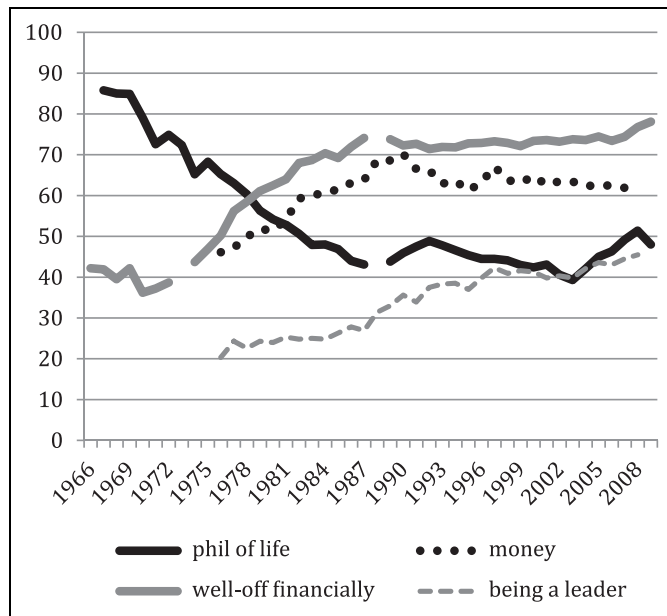
Self-esteem is higher in more recent generations in several analyses of middle school students (Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2001, 2010) and college students (Gentile et al., 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). However, high school students' self-esteem either does not change (Trzesniewski and Donnellan, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2001) or shows smaller increases (Gentile et al., 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). This may be due to the measurement of self-esteem in the Monitoring the Future high school survey, as it asks only 6 of the 10 Rosenberg items, mixes them together with items on hopelessness and locus of control, and changed the item order several times over the course of the survey (Twenge & Campbell, 2010).

Studies in Europe have also begun to show generational shifts in areas related to individualism. Dutch university students now score higher on extraversion (Smits, Dolan, Vorst, Wicherts, & Timmerman, 2011), and Finnish adolescents in 2007 were more likely to name personal issues as fears rather than the global issues such as war and the environment mentioned by the 1983 and 1997 cohorts (Lindfors, Solantaus, & Rimpela, 2012).

Thus, the overwhelming majority of the evidence shows that more recent generations of young people have more positive self-views, endorse more narcissistic personality traits, and are more self-focused. This is consistent with the “Generation Me” view.

Question 2: Is an inflated sense of self good or bad in emerging adulthood? Is there a point at which it becomes too high, and if so, how can that point be identified?





**Figure 2.** Importance of certain life goals, American high school and college students, 1966–2010. The y axis shows the percentage agreeing the goal is important, uncorrected for relative centrality. “Developing a meaningful philosophy of life” and “becoming very well-off financially” are from the American Freshman data set of college students; the importance of “having a great deal of money” and “being a leader in my community” are from the Monitoring the Future data set of high school students. Note that “being a leader in my community” was correlated with valuing fame and narcissism and was not correlated with community feeling. Adapted from Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman (2012).

As noted above, the consequences of narcissism are almost always negative for others and for the self in the long term, though there are some benefits to the self in the short term (for a review, see, e.g., Campbell et al., 2011). Even positive self-views that do not rise to the level of narcissism are not particularly beneficial. For example, self-esteem does not cause good grades or good behavior (for a review, see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). The U.S. ethnic group that scores the lowest on self-esteem is Asian Americans (Twenge & Crocker, 2002), and they perform the *best* academically. When links between low self-esteem and poor outcomes are found, they are usually caused by outside confounding variables such as an unstable home (e.g., Boden, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2008).

Overall, the generational shift is toward more extrinsic values (money, image, and fame) and away from intrinsic values (community feeling, affiliation, and self-acceptance); see Figure 2 (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). This pattern of values is associated with more anxiety and depressive symptoms (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), which are also on the rise over the generations (Twenge et al., 2010). One in ten Americans took an antidepressant in 2008, nearly twice as many as in 1996 (Olfson & Marcus, 2009; Pratt, Brody, & Gu, 2011). Although some of this may be due to overdiagnosis, anonymous questionnaires show similar increases in mental health issues

among high school and college students (Twenge et al., 2010). The increase in antidepressant use may also explain why the youth suicide rate declined between the 1990s and the 2000s. Reported happiness has also declined among American adults since the 1970s (e.g., Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004). More positive self-views have not made us happier.

## Are Only the “Good Parts” of Narcissism Increasing?

The meta-analysis of change over time in narcissism examined only total scores on the NPI, as item-level scores are rarely reported. Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins’s (2008) analysis analyzed shifts in subscales, but, as noted above, that analysis was confounded by campus, making it uninterpretable. Within campus at the University of South Alabama, the NPI items with significant increases over time were “I like to show off my body,” “I like to look at my body,” “I like to look at myself in the mirror,” “I am an extraordinary person,” “I am going to be a great person,” “I can live my life any way I want to,” “I expect a great deal from other people,” “I have a natural talent for influencing people,” “I like to be complimented,” and “I know I am a good person because everyone keeps telling me so” (Twenge & Foster, 2010). These encompass vanity, exploitativeness, and grandiosity, not necessarily desirable traits.

In addition, it is difficult to separate the facets of narcissism reliably. Factor analyses have turned up solutions ranging from two factors to five factors to seven factors. For this reason, many researchers have concluded that relying on the total NPI score is the better approach (for a review, see Campbell et al., 2011). Extraversion and assertiveness, usually considered “good” traits, are integral parts of narcissism and not traits that can be separated from its more negative consequences.

## Declines in Empathy, Concern for Others, Civic Orientation, and Environmental Concern

Possible downsides of too much focus on the self include less empathy, less concern for others, less interest in larger social issues, and selfish behavior that harms the environment (e.g., Campbell et al., 2005). One definition of an inflated sense of self that is “too high” and “bad” might be when these beneficial, other-focused Generation We attitudes decrease. Unfortunately, they have. Dispositional empathy declined among American college students between 1979 and 2008 (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Belief in a just world—a feeling that people get what they deserve, thus indicative of less sympathy for the downtrodden—increased over the same time period among American college students (Malahly, Rubinlicht, & Kaiser, 2009).

In nationally representative samples of 11 million American high school and college students, Millennials (born 1982–1999) expressed less concern for others and less civic engagement than GenX’ers (born 1961–1981) or Boomers (born 1946–1960) did at the same age (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). Millennials were less likely to donate to charity,

less likely to say they would eat differently if it would help starving people and were less interested in community action programs or social work. They were also less likely to participate in politics, less likely to say they thought about social problems, less likely to trust others, and were less likely to take personal action to help the environment or to save energy. The one exception was that they were more likely to report engaging in community service in high school. However, this was most likely due to more high schools requiring community service for graduation over this time period.

In a survey of Americans of age 18 to 29, Smith, Christoffersen, Davison, and Herzog (2011) found that most Millennials embraced an “individualistic morality,” saying they did not see any particular need to help others. Smith et al. also concluded that only about 4% of today’s young people are truly civically engaged, with 96% are not particularly interested in politics, civic affairs, or community activism.

Millennials also reported doing less to help the environment and save energy. For example, fewer Millennials, compared to Boomers and GenX’ers at the same age, agreed that they made “an effort to cut down on driving, in order to save gasoline” or made “an effort to cut down on the amount of electricity use, in order to save energy.” To the question “In your own actions—the things you buy and the things you do—how much of an effort do you make to conserve energy and protect the environment?” three times more Millennials than Boomers answered “none” (Twenge et al., 2012). The declines appeared across a wide diversity of items, from attitudes to behaviors and from individual to government actions to help the environment.

It is important to note that the evidence presented here relies on the responses of young people themselves. These studies did not examine the opinions of older people about the young generation, but instead compared how young people’s responses changed over the decades. Like every generation, today’s emerging adults have been shaped by their culture. Generational differences are not about blaming; they demonstrate the effect of cultural change on individuals.

## Increases in Tolerance and Equality

Millennials are undeniably more accepting of equality across race, gender, and sexual orientation (for a review, see “The Equality Revolution” in *Generation Me*: Twenge, 2006). This is one of the greatest strengths of today’s young generation, and the clear upside of individualism, a cultural system that promotes doing away with group distinctions.

The increase in tolerance supports the idea that this generation is more individualistic. It does not, however, necessarily mean they have greater empathy. Tolerance is not the same as empathy, which involves seeing things from someone else’s perspective. The equality ethic is consistent with an individualistic view, which rejects rigid social roles and favors seeing people as individuals rather than members of groups. This is different from actively empathizing with what it is really like to be a member of a minority group. Everyone being treated the

same is not entirely sufficient, as it fails to make the more empathic leap that experiences differ based on race, gender, and sexual orientation.

## Trends in Other Social Indicators

Many youth indicators have improved in recent years, including teen pregnancy, youth crime, and alcohol consumption. Others, such as drug use, show curvilinear patterns. However, these are not particularly relevant to the Generation Me versus we debate as they are not connected to self-views. A comprehensive review of research on self-esteem found no connection between self-esteem and teen pregnancy or with drug and alcohol use (Baumeister et al., 2003).

Behaviors at least somewhat relevant to the Generation Me versus we idea, such as crime, are determined by many factors other than generational attitudes such as demographic shifts, policing style, technology, drug trends, gang membership, the number of offenders in prison, economic shifts, and even the legalization of abortion (Levitt & Donohue, 2001). Given the multiple determinants of crime, it is very difficult to ascertain whether trends in crime rates are connected to the attitudes of different generations.

Crime is also the only correlate of narcissism that is not increasing. Other correlates have shifted in the direction one would expect from a more narcissistic society: Empathy has decreased (Konrath et al., 2011), materialistic values and the desire to have authority over others have increased (Twenge et al., 2012), plastic surgery rates rose (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2012), cheating has increased (Callahan, 2004), and expectations have far outpaced reality (Reynolds et al., 2006).

Question 3: How, if at all, should we change our culture (parenting, teaching, and media) to benefit the next generation of emerging adults?

We should stop trying to boost self-esteem and stop teaching that self-belief is important to success, because the evidence suggests otherwise (Baumeister et al., 2003). When we try to increase self-esteem without basis, it leads to an inflated sense of self that can become narcissism. We might start by cutting back on grade inflation, participation trophies, and narcissistic language such as “You are special” or “You’re my princess” (she’s not. She’s your kid, and unless you are Prince William, she is not a princess, nor do you want her to act like one). We should also do a better job of teaching the importance of empathy, perspective taking, and involvement in larger social issues.

Trying to change an entire culture is a difficult proposition—and because generations are shaped by culture that is what would be involved. But we can start by teaching children and adolescents that self-belief is not the key to success. Hard work, having a realistic view of one’s abilities, and having empathy for others are much more likely to lead to success than an overinflated sense of self.

## Conclusion

Almost all of the empirical evidence demonstrates a rise in self-focus among American young people, including narcissism, high expectations, self-esteem, thinking one is above average, and focusing on personal (vs. global) fears. Cultural products such as books, TV shows, and popular music also show a rise in self-focus in the United States. The generational decreases in empathy, trust in others, civic orientation, concern for others, and attitudes toward helping the downtrodden also point toward Generation Me and away from Generation We.

Most of these studies ended with data collected in 2009 or before. The severe economic recession of the late 2000s and early 2010s may adjust attitudes in a more communal and affiliative direction (Greenfield, 2009). The most likely candidates for change are concern for others and family orientation, which may become more salient with the economic downturn. Individualism, however, may be too ingrained in the culture to change much (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Thus, the recession may produce a cohort of the Millennial generation who is still Generation Me but more Generation We than their immediate predecessors.

At the moment, the evidence clearly supports the view that today's young generation (born after 1980) is—at least compared to previous generations—more Generation Me than Generation We. This may not be the conclusion we would prefer to find, or the one most pleasant to hear, but this is the conclusion best supported by the responses of young people themselves.

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### Author Biography

**Jean M. Twenge** is a professor of psychology at San Diego State University, the author of *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, and the coauthor (with W. Keith Campbell) of *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*.

# The Dangers of Generational Myth-Making: Rejoinder to Twenge

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## Abstract

We respond here to Twenge's article "The Evidence for Generation Me and Against Generation We." With regard to the question of whether "narcissism" is increasing among emerging adults, flaws are identified in the studies she used to make her case, and counterevidence is presented. We show that for the most part emerging adults' values have not changed in recent decades, but to the extent that change has occurred, it has been in the direction of less selfishness and more engagement in global issues as well as greater desire to ameliorate problems in the community and the world. Finally, we emphasize the duty for scholars to avoid contributing to unjustified negative stereotypes about young people that lead others to have contempt for them and refuse to support their efforts to make their way into adulthood.

## Keywords

well-being, work, antisocial behavior, family relationships, intergenerational relations, moral development

Although denigrating the young is an ancient tradition, it has taken on a new vehemence in our time. Older adults have often had concerns about the moral values of the young and the capacities of the young to fulfill successfully the roles and responsibilities they will have in adulthood (Arnett, 1999; Donnellan & Trzesniewski, 2009). However, the criticisms of American young people today, led by Jean Twenge (2006, 2013), have gone beyond concerns for the young to attacks on them for their "narcissism" and dire warnings that they are leading society into a swamp of selfishness. If Twenge is right in her characterization of today's emerging adults, then we should be grateful to her for sounding the alarm, and we should seek to change their corrupt values and alter the perilous path on which they are headed. However, if she is wrong, then her errors are deeply unfair and damaging to young people, reinforcing the worst negative stereotypes that adults have about them and encouraging adults to vilify them rather than supporting them. We believe she is wrong.

## Is Narcissism—An Inflated Sense of Self—Increasing Among Emerging Adults?

Twenge's (2013) main focus is on the construct of "narcissism." She claims that "Five data sets show more narcissism among recent generations of young people compared to their predecessors" (p. x). However, four of those data sets are samples of students at residential colleges, who represent less than one fourth of all emerging adults, and the same four data sets rely on the Narcissistic Personality

Inventory (NPI), which is a deeply flawed measure of narcissism (Arnett, 2013).

The fifth data set seems more persuasive, at first glance. It is a national sample of over 35,000 American adults of age 18 and over (the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, or NESARC), and in this data set narcissism was measured using a clinical measure of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD; Grant et al., 2004). Rates of NPD were found to be nearly three times as high among participants in their 20s as compared to those aged 65 and over (Stinson et al., 2008). Actually, however, this study has serious limitations. The questions asked people whether they had ever experienced the symptoms in their lifetime, but is it plausible to think that people in their 60s, 70s, or upward could remember symptoms they might have experienced decades ago? An extensive literature warns of recall biases in cross-sectional studies of psychiatric disorders (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2010; Simon & VonKorff, 1995). Furthermore, the interview that established the "diagnosis" of NPD was conducted not by clinically trained experts but by census workers with no clinical expertise. Trull, Jahng, Tomko, Wood,

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and Sher (2010) applied more stringent scoring methods to the NESARC data and reported an overall prevalence of NPD of 1.0%, down from the 6.2% found in the original study; the prevalence of NPD for 20- to 29-year-olds dropped to 1.7% as opposed to the 9.4% figure cited by Twenge (2013; T. J. Trull, e-mail message to Brent Donnellan, September 2012). In short, just as with the NPI, the NPD census interview is a dubious measure of narcissism and cannot be used with confidence to make generational distinctions (Lenzenweger, 2008).

Twenge (2013) claims that it is not only narcissism that has risen in recent decades among emerging adults but “overly positive self-views” in other domains. Pointing to national studies of college students over the period 1966–2010, she asserts that recent students were more likely to rate themselves as above average in areas such as academic ability, drive to achieve, and leadership ability (Twenge, Cambell, & Gentile, 2011). However, the authors of the original study that Twenge (2013) relies upon for this claim (the American Freshmen study conducted annually by the Higher Education Research Institute) have emphasized that scores in these areas rose in the 1970s and early 1980s but have been flat since the late 1980s (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007, p. 14). What *has* risen in recent decades, they note, are “increasing altruistic tendencies in community service and the desire to help others in difficulty” (p. 36).

Twenge (2013) also asserts that today’s high school students have higher expectations for future educational and professional attainments than in the past, “even though actual attainment of these goals has not changed” (p. x). It is true that high school students’ expectations for educational attainment are higher than ever, but this is something we should encourage and support, not denigrate. In an economy increasingly focused on information and technology, a college degree is the key to occupational success, providing an advantage in earnings over a lifetime of more than a million dollars according to most estimates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Also, Twenge’s (2013) claim that educational attainment in the United States has not changed over the past half century is patently false. As of 2011, 32% of 25- to 29-year-olds had obtained a 4-year degree, compared to 22% in 1980 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

### **Is an Inflated Sense of Self Good or Bad in Emerging Adulthood? Is There a Point at Which It Becomes Too High, and If So, How Can That Point Be Identified?**

In our view, Twenge’s (2013) claim that narcissism has increased in the current generation of emerging adults is false. However, even if it were true, it would only be worrisome if it could be shown that their increased narcissism was harmful to themselves or others. Otherwise, their self-belief might instead be seen as a psychological resource they could draw upon when they hit choppy waters during their journey to adulthood (Hill & Roberts, 2012). Twenge (2013) claims that the negative effects of “narcissism” among today’s emerging adults are

evident in numerous ways, but each of her claims dissolves upon close examination.

According to Twenge (2013), the alleged increase in narcissism has promoted a generational trend “toward more extrinsic values (money, image, and fame) and away from intrinsic values (community feeling, affiliation, and self-acceptance)” (p. x). However, the evidence Twenge (2013, figure 2) presents for this claim is weaker than she acknowledges, and there is contrary evidence as well. The life goal of “being very well-off financially” rose in the 1970s but has not changed in prevalence among American college freshmen since the late 1980s (73% considered this “essential” or “very important” in 2006 vs. 72% in 1990; Pryor et al., 2007). Similarly, the importance of “having a great deal of money” rose in the 1970s but has not changed among high school students since the early 1980s. Moreover, in a recent national survey of 18- to 29-year-olds, 80% agreed with the statement, “It is more important to me to enjoy my job than to make a lot of money,” and 86% agreed that “It is important to me to have a career that does some good in the world” (Arnett & Schwab, 2013). This hardly seems like a portrait of a generation that places an excessive value on money and lacks community feeling.

Twenge (2013) claims that increased narcissism is also reflected in other attitudes of emerging adults, including “less empathy, less concern for others, less interest in larger social issues, and selfish behavior that harms the environment” (p. X). Again, other evidence is contrary to Twenge’s claims. For example, Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) analyzed data from the annual Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey, a national survey of high school seniors, and concluded that over the period from 1976 through 2006 there were no meaningful changes in egotism, self-enhancement, individualism, self-esteem, importance of social status, hopelessness, happiness, life satisfaction, loneliness, antisocial behavior, political activity, or civic engagement over that period. Note that the data used by Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) in their analysis was a representative national sample, unlike the convenience samples of college students Twenge relies upon.

Twenge (2013) especially criticizes emerging adults for their alleged lack of involvement in political and social issues and lack of concern for the state of the world. Again, this charge is difficult to square with the evidence. After declining in the 1990s, voting rates among 18-29-year-olds rose in 2004 and 2008 (Pew Research Center, 2010). In fact, the 51% voting rate among 18- to 29-year-olds in 2008 resulted in the smallest gap between younger and older voters since 1972. As for the claim that they care little about the state of the world, Twenge’s evidence is thin and she ignores contrary evidence. It may be true, as Twenge (2013) notes, that fewer Millennials than GenX’ers or Boomers agree that they made “an effort to cut down on driving, in order to save gasoline” or made “an effort to cut down on the amount of electricity you use, in order to save energy,” but the motivation for these behaviors may have been to save money, not to protect the environment. Twenge (2013) also overlooks substantial evidence that today’s

**Table 1.** Life Goals, Mean Ratings Within Each Generation.

Baby Boomers		Millennials	
Good marriage and family	3.57	Good marriage and family	3.64
Steady work	3.54	Steady work	3.59
Find purpose in life	3.52	Strong friendship	3.57
Strong friendship	3.49	Give child better opportunities	3.54
Be a success at work	3.40	Be a success at work	3.53
Give child better opportunities	3.30	Find purpose in life	3.41
Have time for recreation	2.88	Have time for recreation	3.10
Have new experiences	2.70	Have a lot of money	2.83
Contribute to society	2.63	Contribute to society	2.81
Have a lot of money	2.54	Have new experiences	2.80
Correct inequalities	2.22	Live close to parents	2.50
Live close to parents	2.04	Be a leader in the community	2.38
Be a leader in the community	1.91	correct inequalities	2.30
Get away from this area	1.80	Get away from this area	1.98

Note. The data are from the Monitoring the Future project's annual survey of American high school seniors (see [www.monitoringthefuture.org](http://www.monitoringthefuture.org)). Items were rated on a 4-point scale from 1 = "Not Important" to 4 = "Extremely Important." Millennial data are from 2000 to 2008, whereas Baby Boomer data are from 1976 to 1978, following the classification scheme used in Twenge et al. (2012).

emerging adults are more, not less, concerned about the state of the world. Survey researcher John Zogby (2008) calls today's 18- to 29-year-olds the "first globals" because his data indicate that they see themselves as citizens of the world and are more devoted than older generations to addressing global problems. Zogby concludes that "Members of this generation are more globally engaged than members of any similar age cohort in American history" (p. 94).

Even Twenge's (2013) own data do not support her argument that today's emerging adults are exceptionally narcissistic compared to those in decades past. She is right that "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" appears to have declined as a goal for college freshmen since the 1960s, and "becoming a leader in my community" has risen in importance among high school students since the late 1970s (Twenge, 2013, figure 2). However, these findings support conclusions the opposite of Twenge's thesis. Arguably, "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" is a rather narcissistic goal, and it has declined, whereas "becoming a leader in my community" is an other-oriented goal, and it has risen. Thus, the results could be interpreted as indicating less narcissism in recent decades rather than more.

Twenge's (2013) efforts to support her thesis frequently lead to exaggerations of the differences between the generations. For example, she states that the life goals of today's "Millennials" are more individualistic than that of their "Baby Boomer" parents, and she presents a few items (2013, figure 2) to indicate this shift. These analyses are based mainly on MTF data. However, Twenge's (2013) selective presentation of these

data is highly misleading. As shown in Table 1, when life goals in the MTF are ranked from highest to lowest, the Baby Boomers and Millennials are highly similar (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). Members of both cohorts strongly value having a good marriage and family life, strong friendships, providing opportunities to their children, steady work, and career success. These goals balance values of relationships to others with values of personal achievement and reflect the critical tasks of adulthood regardless of birth cohort membership. They certainly do not support Twenge's claims of narcissism among today's young people.

Twenge (2013) concedes that the behavior of young people has improved in many ways in recent years, in areas including teen pregnancy, youth crime, and alcohol consumption (cf. Arnett, 2013). However, she dismisses these positive changes as "not particularly relevant to the Generation Me vs. We debate as they are not connected to self-views" (p. x). But if the self-views of today's emerging adults are as disturbingly narcissistic as Twenge's claims, should not this be reflected in their behavior? Remember, Twenge (2013) also warns that "narcissism is not just confidence; it is overconfidence, and it is linked to negative outcomes" (p. x). But where are those negative outcomes? If their alleged narcissism results in less empathy, less concern for others, and more selfish behavior, why does their behavior, across the board, reflect more concern for others and less selfishness?

### How, If at All, Should We Change Our Culture (Parenting, Teaching, and Media) to Benefit the Next Generation of Emerging Adults?

The debate over Generation Me versus Generation We is more than simply academic. This issue is of national interest as well, and academic works addressing the issue often make their way into the public arena. Potentially, the views of scholars on this topic can influence adults' attitudes toward the young and their willingness to endorse public policies to support young people, such as funding for state colleges and universities and government-sponsored school-to-work programs. Consequently, anyone purporting, as Twenge does, to reinforce negative attitudes toward emerging adults and portray them as selfish, morally deficient, and unconcerned about others has a responsibility to be extremely careful about the data and the argument presented, avoiding misrepresentation and excessive claims (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010).

We do not believe this care has been shown by Jean Twenge. On the contrary, in our view her portrayal of emerging adults is extremely one sided, overinterpreting her own data and failing to recognize a substantial body of contradictory data in order to promote her thesis. We do not think her intention is to cause harm to young people. However, her unfairly negative portrait of the young provides ammunition to those who believe today's young people deserve to be scorned and ridiculed.

The irony is that, far from deserving such opprobrium, today's emerging adults should be recognized as exceptional in a range of positive ways. Not only do they not fit Twenge's caricature as a generation of narcissists, they are a strikingly laudable generation, from their high rates of community service to their concern about global issues to their low rates of risk behavior (Arnett, 2013; Zogby, 2011). It is time they are commended rather than condemned.

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# Overwhelming Evidence for Generation Me: A Reply to Arnett

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## Abstract

Documenting trends in young people's self-reported traits and attitudes is empirical research, not a complaint or a stereotype. Rising cultural individualism has both good consequences (more gender equality) and more negative ones (narcissism, mental health issues). Arnett seems to believe we should embrace studies of cultural change only if they find positive trends. A total of 11 studies show a generational increase in narcissism, 7 using noncollege samples. They include respondents from high school age to adults, four different ways of measuring narcissism, three different research methods, four different ways of recruiting respondents, three different countries, and eight sets of authors. Eleven additional samples show increases in positive self-views. Perspective taking, empathy, and concern for others have declined, not increased. Narcissism is not related to teen pregnancy or car accidents. An enormous body of research finds generational increases in anxiety, depression, and mental health issues, most in noncollege samples.

## Keywords

generation, transitions to adulthood, anxiety, self-esteem, depression, intergenerational relations, Internet, mental health, personality, technology

When I first began researching generational differences, I was a 21-year-old undergraduate. In the years since, my coauthors and I have identified generational trends considered positive (gender equality: Twenge, 1997, 2001; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012c) and negative (narcissism and anxiety: Twenge, 2000; Twenge & Foster, 2010). Growing cultural individualism is the likely cause of both the positive and the negative trends, also identified by many other researchers (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007; Cai, Kwan, & Sedikides, 2012; Eckersley & Dear, 2002; Fukuyama, 1999; Kesebir & Kesebir, in press; Kessler et al., 2003; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Konrath, Hsing, & O'Brien, 2011; Lindfors, Solantaus, & Rimpela, 2012; Newsom, Archer, Trumbetta, & Gottesman, 2003; Reynolds, Stewart, Sischo, & MacDonald, 2006; Simmons & Penn, 1994; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Uhls & Greenfield, 2011).

Describing this research as a "complaint," "negative stereotypes," and "slander," as Arnett does, shoots the messenger while ignoring the overwhelming evidence for the message. Such language is also a bizarre way to describe empirical research on generations. An analogy to other group differences might be helpful. For example, if a study finds that men are more narcissistic than women, are those researchers committing "slander" or "negative stereotyping" of men? If a study finds that one drug is effective against a disease and another is not, does that "slander" or spread "negative stereotypes" about the ineffective drug? Few people trained in

empirical research, including Arnett, would agree with such absurdities. Yet, the generations studies use the same research methods and measures, and these are the claims Arnett makes about them.

Generational shifts are not about criticizing youth but about documenting cultural change. Analyzing trends in young people's self-reported personality traits and attitudes leads to a better understanding of modern culture and of today's youth. Arnett seems to believe we should embrace the results of such studies only if they find positive trends. If they find negative trends, one should criticize the researchers for "complaining" and spreading "negative stereotypes."

Arnett's article contains many patently false statements (see Table 1), such as "Twenge's data are drawn entirely from the college students who attend 4-year colleges." Our generational analyses have included child and adolescent samples from the beginning in articles published as long as 13 years ago (e.g., Twenge, 2000; Twenge & Campbell, 2001; Twenge & Im, 2007; Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004; Wells & Twenge, 2005) and, more recently, a nationally

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**Table 1.** Summary of Responses to Arnett's Claims.

Claim	Response
All of Twenge's generational studies are based on college students	Studies included child samples from the beginning and in recent years also use a nationally representative sample of high school students
Narcissism is not higher in recent generations	11 studies find a generational increase in narcissism and 11 more find increases in other positive self-views
Narcissism cannot be higher because teen pregnancy and car accidents have declined	Narcissism is not related to teen pregnancy or car accidents
No evidence that "young people's functioning is worse than in the past," and no increases in anxiety or depression outside of college samples	At least 14 studies show increases in anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues over time, most in noncollege samples
Prejudice has declined, so recent generations are better at perspective taking	Perspective taking and empathy are down, and are not the same thing as low prejudice
Young people's generosity and their desire to improve the world are higher now than ever	Generosity (e.g., charity donations) and wanting to improve the world are lower now, based on two surveys of 9 million high school and college students since the 1960s and 1970s
Research on generational differences is "slander," a "complaint," and "negative stereotyping"	Empirical research on generational differences by many authors finds both positive and negative trends, often across the culture as a whole. Should we only believe the positive trends?

representative sample of high school students (e.g., Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). We have also examined trends in books, song lyrics, and naming practices (DeWall, Pond, Campbell, & Twenge, 2011; Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012a, in press). All of these studies produce the same results as the college student samples: growing individualism and self-focus and more mental health issues.

### Overwhelming Evidence for a Generational Increase in Narcissism

The evidence for rising narcissism goes far beyond college students. In a nationally representative sample of 35,000 people, 3 times as many Americans in their 20s (compared to those in their 60s) experienced narcissistic personality disorder (NPD; Stinson et al., 2008). This study examined lifetime prevalence, not current symptoms; thus, the shift is due to generation, not age. A reanalysis of these data found smaller prevalence rates but the same generational increase (Trull, Jahng, Tomko, Wood, & Sher, 2010). Second, in a nationally representative sample of high school students over time, Millennials/GenY/GenMe (born after 1982) were more likely to value life goals correlated with narcissistic traits, such as becoming very well-off financially, being a leader, and having authority over others (Twenge et al., 2012).

Four cross-sectional studies show higher levels of narcissism among emerging adults compared to older adults in non-college samples from the United States, New Zealand, and China (Cai et al., 2012; Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Roberts, Edmonds, & Grijalva, 2010; Wilson & Sibley, 2011). These differences could be due to age or generation, but the only longitudinal study of narcissism from emerging adulthood to middle adulthood found *increases* with age (Roberts & Helson, 1997). This suggests that the cross-sectional studies are identifying a generational difference.

Arnett grossly mischaracterizes the college student samples. Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins (2008) did not "carefully examine" our nationwide meta-analysis of 85 samples. Instead, they presented their own data from nine samples of University of California students, which increase over time in narcissism once a confound is controlled, as does the Roberts, Edmonds, and Grijalva (2010) combined data set (Twenge & Foster, 2010).

The confound, with the recent samples from a low-scoring campus, is a profound error and not just a different way of analyzing the data. Consider human height, which has increased over the generations and shows a large sex difference. Trzesniewski's analysis was the equivalent of taking a sample of men from the 1800s and a sample of women from the 2000s and concluding that height has not changed.

This totals to 11 studies showing a generational increase in narcissism, 7 using noncollege samples. They include respondents from high school age to adults, four different ways of measuring narcissism, three different research methods, four different ways of recruiting respondents, three different countries, and eight sets of authors. This is an overwhelming amount of evidence.

Nor is the increase subtle. Stinson et al. (2008) found a tripling of the prevalence of NPD. Fifty-eight percent more college students answered the majority of Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) items in the narcissistic direction in 2009 compared to 1982 (30% vs. 19%; Twenge & Foster, 2010).

And is the NPI a "dubious measure of narcissism?" Apparently not, as it is employed in 77% of studies of narcissistic traits (Cain, Pincus, & Ansell, 2008). The NPI is also the best self-report predictor of narcissistic traits derived from clinical interviews (Miller, Gaughan, Pryor, Kamen, & Campbell, 2009).

These 11 studies do not even include the 11 additional samples showing increases in positive self-views and self-focus, most in noncollege populations (Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010; Lindfors et al., 2012; Reynolds et al., 2006; Twenge &

Campbell, 2001, 2008; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012b). In addition, an increasing number of 14- to 16-year-olds agreed with the statement “I am an important person” (Newsom et al., 2003). Virtually the only exception is the null effect for high school students’ self-esteem (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010), which we also found (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). Thus, 22 studies/samples show a generational increase in positive self-views (including narcissism), and only 2 do not.

## The Evidence Against Generation We

The longest chapter in *Generation Me* is titled “The Equality Revolution” (Twenge, 2006), so I agree with Arnett that younger generations are more tolerant and support equality. This is completely consistent with an increase in individualism, which promotes discarding group distinctions based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. Arnett equates greater tolerance with more perspective taking, but these are two different concepts. They have also shown opposing trends over time: Perspective taking and empathy declined sharply among college students between 1979 and 2009 (Konrath et al., 2011). Greater perspective taking would predict less bias on all characteristics, but individualism would predict reduced bias only on group membership and not characteristics perceived as controllable. This has indeed occurred. For example, weight is viewed as controllable (Crandall et al., 2001), and bias against the overweight is increasing (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008; Latner & Stunkard, 2003). Discarding group distinctions and taking someone else’s perspective are entirely different things.

The best data available show a generational decline, not an increase, in generosity and the desire to “improve the world.” In nationally representative samples of high school and college students ( $N = 9$  million), charity donations are down and fewer “think about the social problems of the nation and the world.” The decline in concern for others and civic orientation were very consistent across many diverse items, including both attitudes and behaviors, and appear among both high school and entering college students (Twenge et al., 2012). They also replicate the generational decline in empathy (Konrath et al., 2011) in a different sample with different items.

What about the increased volunteering Arnett mentions? Among 25 items in the Monitoring the Future high school student survey measuring concern for others, volunteering showed the lone significant increase from Boomers to Millennials. This is not surprising, as high schools increasingly required volunteer service (Skinner & Chapman, 1999). This illustrates the importance of examining all of the data instead of cherry-picking 1 item.

It is wonderful that teen pregnancy and car accidents have declined. However, narcissism is not correlated with self-control (e.g., Jonason & Tost, 2010). No studies have linked narcissism with teen pregnancy or car accidents. It is puzzling that Arnett would discuss these trends completely unrelated to narcissism.

Research has linked narcissism to other outcomes, however. If young people were more narcissistic, we would expect seven outcomes: more materialism, more cheating, less emphasis on committed relationships, less empathy, more plastic surgery, more unrealistic expectations, and more crime. Six of these have occurred. The only exception is crime, possibly because it is determined by so many factors outside of personality traits. Other acts of aggression such as bullying and incivility may have increased, and future research should address this possibility.

## Anxiety and Depression

Arnett states that “there is no evidence whatsoever” that young people’s “functioning is worse than in the past” and that “studies focusing on emerging adults have not been conducted, except on college student samples.” This is wildly incorrect. A long list of studies from many different disciplines finds generational increases in anxiety, depression, and mental health problems among noncollege populations in the United States and other Western countries (e.g., Andersen, Thielen, Bech, Nygaard, & Diderichsen, 2011; Brault, Meuleman, & Bracke, 2012; Collishaw, Maughan, Natarajan, & Pickles, 2009; Goodwin, 2003; Kessler et al., 2003; Klerman & Weissman, 1989; Lewinsohn, Rohde, Seeley, & Fischer, 1993; Murphy et al., 2004; Newsom et al., 2003; Pratt, Brody, & Gu, 2011; Scollon & Diener, 2006; Swindle, Heller, Pescosolido, & Kikuzawa, 2000; Twenge, 2000; Twenge et al., 2010). Instead of citing this massive literature, Arnett mentions a single null study—and one examining juveniles under 18, not emerging adults.

These mental health issues are not “a normal part of . . . emerging adulthood,” as Arnett claims, as earlier generations did not experience this level of problems. In fact, the very factors Arnett mentions—such as finding a marriage partner later and jumping from one job to another—might explain why anxiety and depression have increased.

## Conclusion

Is this research “an indictment of an entire *generation*,” as Arnett claims? No, because average generational differences do not necessarily apply to every member of the group. Scientific studies always report differences based on averages, however, so this caveat should not be necessary.

If anything is being indicted, it is the culture, not just one generation. Today’s emerging adults did not raise themselves; they have been influenced by education, media, technology, credit systems, and other cultural influences (and not just by “indulgent parenting,” as Arnett misstates my argument in *Generation Me*). For example, social networking sites such as Facebook increase users’ narcissism and materialism (Wilcox & Stephen, in press). American books now focus more on the self and individualism (Twenge et al., 2012a, in press) and less on concern for others and moral character (Kesebir & Kesebir, in press). More positive outcomes of individualism,

such as greater gender equality, also appear in recent books (Twenge et al., 2012c).

Generational differences and the idea of emerging adulthood as a new life stage are based on the same premise: Things are not what they used to be. Taking longer to settle into adult roles is likely both a symptom and a cause of rising individualism. My research and Arnett's are not opposing, but complementary. I wish that the view was more widely shared.

Like any generation, today's emerging adults have strengths and weaknesses. I agree that we should praise their strengths. However, ignoring their weaknesses will not make the negative cultural trends go away. Instead, we could start by challenging the American cultural message that thinking you are great is the key to success, when it is not (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Or we could try to discover why one out of nine Americans takes an antidepressant (Pratt et al., 2011). Denial, however, will get us nowhere.

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