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What is This?
The Dangers of Generational Myth-Making:
Rejoinder to Twenge

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett1, Kali H. Trzesniewski2, and M. Brent Donnellan3

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,
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 success, providing an advantage in earnings over a lifetime of more than a million dollars according to most occupational success, providing an advantage in earnings over

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
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 devoted than older generations to addressing global problems. 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 devoted than older generations to addressing global problems. 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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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