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The Dangers of Generational Myth-Making: Rejoinder to Twenge

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

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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). 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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