STUCK ON YOURSELF
ARE MILLENNIALS REALLY MORE INDIVIDUALISTIC?
BY STEPHANIE KRAMER
The alarm sounded more than a decade ago by some researchers about "millennials being narcissists" has long since become mainstream. Among them, Dr. Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, who has published several books on the subject.

Twenge claims that modern culture is moving toward greater individualism and has produced a generation of young people with over-inflated egos. On NPR’s “Hidden Brain” podcast, Twenge argues that social media is a driving force behind the trend, as it encourages constant self-promotion and enables people to broadcast every detail of their lives. At the same time, parenting styles have fostered increased levels of self-esteem and the sense of specialness.

Everyone belongs to his or her generation. The culture you grow up in, along with economic and world events as well as behavioral norms, shape your worldview. In general, says Twenge, millennials see themselves in a more positive light, have high expectations, and are less attuned to global events.

Her observations are largely founded on evidence that millennials tend to score higher on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The NPI, which contains 40 pairs of questions, asks people whether they agree with statements such as “I would prefer to be a leader” versus “It makes little difference to me whether I am a leader or not.”

In a 2008 article published in Journal of Personality, Twenge conducted a meta-analysis of 85 studies that pooled the results from surveys done on undergraduates using NPI results between 1979 and 2006. A total of 16,475 students were included in the analysis. The results showed a significant increase in NPI scores over time, a pattern that continued in later studies. As Twenge states in a 2013 paper, the combined results “point toward ‘Generation ME’ and away from ‘Generation WE.’”

But not all psychologists are convinced. Many critics question the use of studies on college students who represent only a fraction of the U.S. population. Some also wonder whether the NPI is a reliable test for gauging narcissism. “The NPI is the most commonly used test of narcissism. But because it measures narcissistic behavior in a general sense, it includes positive traits, such as assertiveness, along with harmful ones. This makes it difficult to differentiate between pathological and normal narcissism. Even items like "I am a born leader" raise questions. Is the person who says "yes" to that truly a narcissist? Does envisioning oneself in a leadership role indicate a preoccupation with oneself or outward appearance?"

Indeed, many psychologists say that millennials are exceptional in different ways. "They are more likely to choose marriage partners from different backgrounds than their own. Some researchers dispute that view, however, citing studies that show that millennials are less