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The Evidence for Generation Me and Against Generation We

Jean M. Twenge¹

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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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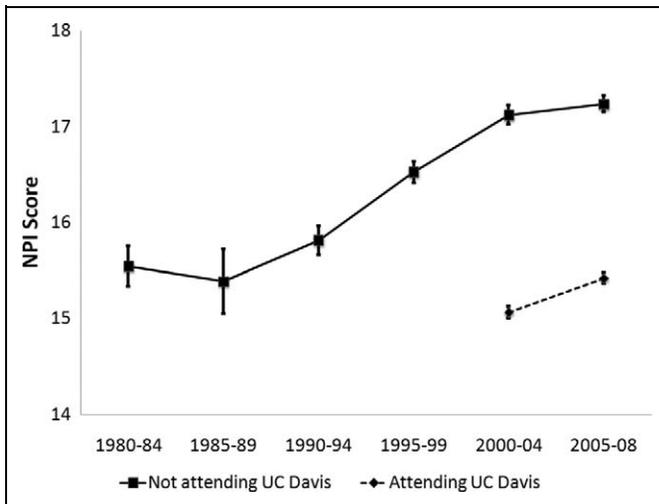


Figure 1. Mean Narcissistic Personality Inventory scores 1982–2009 for students either attending UC Davis or not. Capped vertical bars denote ± 1 SE. Adapted from Twenge and Foster (2010).

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?

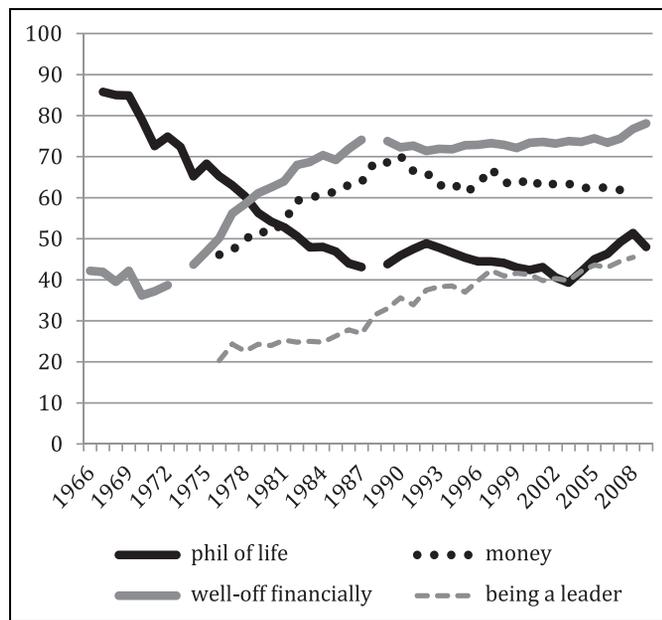


Figure 2. Importance of certain life goals, American high school and college students, 1966–2010. The y axis shows the percentage agreeing the goal is important, uncorrected for relative centrality. “Developing a meaningful philosophy of life” and “becoming very well-off financially” are from the American 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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