

HIGH HOPES IN A GRIM WORLD

Emerging Adults' Views of Their Futures and "Generation X"

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Views of the future were explored among emerging adults (aged 21 through 28). In general, they viewed their personal futures optimistically and believed their lives would be as good or better than their parents' lives in aspects such as financial well-being, career achievements, personal relationships, and overall quality of life. Interview responses indicated that many participants emphasized personal relationships, especially marriage, as the foundation of their future happiness. However, regarding the future of their generation as a whole, they were pessimistic. A majority of them agreed with the "Generation X" characterization of their generation as cynical and pessimistic. Reasons for this cynicism and pessimism were diverse and included economic prospects as well as societal problems such as crime and environmental destruction. Nevertheless, the participants tended to believe they would succeed in their personal pursuit of happiness even amidst the difficult conditions facing their generation and the world.

Dramatic demographic changes have taken place during the past 30 years for young people in their late teens and 20s in American society. As recently as 1970, the median age of marriage was 21 for females and 23 for males; by 1996, it had risen to 25 for females and 27 for males (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Age of first childbirth followed a similar pattern. Also during this time, the proportion of young people obtaining higher education after high school rose steeply from 48% in 1970 to 60% by 1993 (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Schulenberg, Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley, 1995). Similar changes have taken place in other industrialized countries (Noble, Cover, & Yanagishita, 1996).

In effect, a new period of life has opened up between adolescence and adulthood as a normative experience for young people in industri-

alized societies. The late teens and early 20s are no longer a period in which the typical pattern is to enter and settle into long-term adult roles. On the contrary, it is a period of life characterized for many young people by a high degree of change, experimentation, and instability (Rindfuss, 1991) as they explore a variety of possibilities in love, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 1998, in press; Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, in press). The period was originally termed "youth" by Keniston (1971), but because of certain inadequacies in the term *youth*, it has more recently been called *emerging adulthood* (see Arnett, 1998, in press; Arnett & Taber, 1994). Emerging adulthood is conceptualized as beginning with the end of secondary education, usually age 18 in American society, and ending in the mid- to late 20s for most people as the experimentation of the period is succeeded by more enduring life choices (Arnett, 1998, in press).

Emerging adulthood is distinct demographically and subjectively from adolescence (roughly from ages 10 through 17) and young adulthood (roughly from age 30 to the early 40s). Emerging adulthood is distinct demographically because it is a period characterized by an exceptionally high level of demographic change and diversity. For example, residential mobility peaks in the mid-20s, and the 20s are also years of frequent change and transition in occupation, educational status, and personal relationships (Rindfuss, 1991). Emerging adulthood is also distinct subjectively. The majority of adolescents do not believe they have reached adulthood, and the majority of people aged 30 and older believe they have, but most people in their 20s see themselves as somewhere in between adolescence and adulthood: The majority answer "in some respects yes, in some respects no" when asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood (Arnett, 1997, 2000).

Despite the fact that a period of emerging adulthood has become normative in American society, little research has focused on development during the 20s. Although studies of college students are abundant in social science research, research on young people who do not attend college and on young people beyond college age is scarce (William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, 1988). Keniston's (1971) conception of youth did not generate research attention to the period, and the concept of emerging adulthood has only been articulated very recently (Arnett, 1998, in press; Arnett & Taber, 1994). One exception to this neglect is the long tradi-

tion of sociological and demographic research on the timing of transition events such as marriage and parenthood (e.g., Hogan & Astone, 1986; Marini, 1984; Rindfuss, 1991). Other than this area, however, there is little research on this age period (Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991).

In lieu of scholarly attention, a great deal of public attention has focused on this period in the past decade in works of fiction and in journalistic accounts. These works have tended to depict young people in their 20s as pessimistic and uncertain as they approach the threshold of adulthood. Most notably, Coupland's (1991) novel *Generation X* portrayed three rootless young people in their mid- to late 20s and their reluctance to make the role transitions associated with the transition to adulthood (e.g., marriage, a long-term occupation). The novel generated a remarkable amount of attention and commentary, and "Generation X" quickly became familiar as a term applied to the current generation of young people in their late teens and 20s.

Journalists have devoted considerable attention to Generation X. In journalistic accounts, Generation X has been described as materialistic, pessimistic, and cynical (Giles, 1994; Hornblower, 1997; Kinsley, 1994). Young people in their 20s are often depicted as daunted by the mixed economic prospects that face them in the workplace, by the personal debt they have accumulated by the time they leave higher education, and by the national debt that has been left to them by previous generations (Roper Organization, 1993). At the same time, they are depicted as ambitious and eager to pursue their financial, occupational, and personal goals (Hornblower, 1997).

Most of the information used by journalists in depicting Generation X in this way comes from polling data and marketing research, especially by Yankelovich Partners and the Roper Organization. For example, in a 1996 poll, Yankelovich Partners found that 64% of young people aged 18 to 24 agreed that "material things, like what I drive and the house I live in, are really important to me" (Hornblower, 1997, p. 65). About one half believed that they would be better off financially than their parents. Nearly all—96%—agreed, "I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life" (p. 62). In a 1992 poll, the Roper Organization found 18- to 29-year-olds to have higher material aspirations than 18- to 29-year-olds polled by the organization in 1978 (Roper Organization, 1993). Fifty-nine percent aspired to

have a lot of money (compared with 50% in 1978), 42% aspired to have a second car (28% in 1978), and 41% aspired to have a vacation home (25% in 1978). Sixty-nine percent included a job that pays a lot more than average as part of their definition of "the good life" (58% in 1978). However, an equal percentage included an interesting job as part of their definition. Many of the poll results on the views of emerging adults concern economic issues, partly because these are believed to be issues that are especially salient to young people as they enter the workforce, but also because the objective of pollsters such as Yankelovich Partners and the Roper Organization is to inform their corporate clients about the economic characteristics of their potential customers.

This study is an exploration of views of the future among emerging adults, including not only economic issues but also their views of their prospects in terms of career achievements, personal relationships, and overall quality of life. Views of the future are an important topic with respect to emerging adults because for many of them, the nature and quality of their adult lives remain to be constructed. It is a time when, for many young people, few major life decisions have been settled and a wide range of options remains possible. For this reason, questions about the future are especially relevant to their lives.

In addition to questions about their own futures, participants in the study were asked what they perceived to be the view of the future held by young people more generally. Specifically, they were asked whether they agreed with the depiction of their generation as pessimistic and cynical as reflected in the term *Generation X*. This question was asked in order to compare it with the questions on their personal futures to get a sense of how they compared their own view of the future with the view of the future held by their generation. It was also asked to explore the validity of popular ideas about Generation X.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 140 persons aged 21 to 28 years. General characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. The sample was

evenly divided between 21- to 24-year-olds (50%) and 25- to 28-year-olds (50%) and between males and females. Close to half of the participants were married, and about one fourth had had at least one child. Two thirds of the participants were employed full-time, and one fourth part-time. 28% were in school full-time, and 8% were enrolled part-time. "Some college" was the modal level of education, indicated by 52% of the participants. There was a broad range of variability in the social class of the participants' families of origin, as indicated by father's and mother's education.

PROCEDURE

The data presented here were collected as part of a larger study on emerging adults in their 20s. The study took place in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. Potential participants were identified through enrollment lists from the two local high schools for the previous 3 to 10 years. All persons on the enrollment lists who had current addresses in the area that could be identified through phone book listings or by contacting their parents were sent a letter describing the study and then contacted by phone. Of the persons contacted, 72% agreed to participate in the study. Data collection took place in the author's office or the participant's home, depending on the participant's preference. The study was conducted during 1994 and 1995.

MEASURES

The study included an interview and a questionnaire. Questionnaire items that pertained to participants' views of the future were as follows:

- "Overall, do you think the quality of your life is likely to be better or worse than your parents' has been?"
- "Overall, do you think your financial well-being in adulthood is likely to be better or worse than your parents' has been?"
- "Overall, do you think your career achievements are likely to be better or worse than your parents' have been?"
- "Overall, do you think your personal relationships in adulthood are likely to be better or worse than your parents' have been?"

TABLE 1
Background Characteristics of the Sample

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	
Male	53
Female	47
Employment	
Full	67
Part	24
None	9
Ethnicity	
White	94
Black	5
Other	1
Marital status	
Married	60
Single	40
Current educational status	
In school full-time	28
In school part-time	8
Not in school	65
Number of children	
None	73
One	14
Two or more	13
Mother's education	
Less than high school degree	8
High school degree	23
Some college	23
College degree	27
Some graduate school or graduate school degree	19
Father's education	
Less than high school	8
High school degree	24
Some college	15
College degree	24
Some graduate school or graduate school degree	30

For each of these questions, participants could answer "better," "worse," or "about the same."

From the interview, two questions were of interest for this article. One was similar to one of the items on the questionnaire and con-

cerned participants' personal futures: "Do you think your life, overall, is likely to be better or worse than your parents' lives have been?" The second concerned their perceptions of their generation's views of the future: "Some people have called your generation *Generation X* and said that one of the distinctive characteristics of your generation is that you tend to be cynical and pessimistic about the future. Do you think this is true of your generation?" This question was added after the study had begun and was answered by 76 of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and the discussion are integrated in this section. This approach was taken because it was believed that the qualitative interview results, in particular, were better suited to discussion commentary at the time they were presented rather than in a separate section. With respect to the statistics on the quantitative data, analyses were conducted using chi-square tests. The four questionnaire items about participants' personal futures and the coded *Generation X* question from the interview were analyzed in relation to age (21 to 24 vs. 25 to 28), gender, marital status, parenthood (no children vs. one or more children), father's education, mother's education, and parental divorce. These are all variables that could conceivably be related to emerging adults' views of the future. Only analyses that were statistically significant are discussed below.

With respect to the qualitative data, for the interview question on overall quality of life in comparison to parents' lives, there was a nearly identical question on the questionnaire, so the interview data were used only for illustration of certain themes underlying their responses to the questionnaire item. For the interview question about *Generation X*, responses were coded into three categories: agree, disagree, and ambiguous or uncodable. Responses were coded by the author, and 30% of the responses were coded by a second coder, a colleague of the author who was not otherwise involved in the study. The rate of agreement was more than 90%. The author then identified themes within participants' responses to the interview question and selected quotes for illustrating those themes.

TABLE 2
Emerging Adults' Comparisons of Their Future Lives
in Relation to Their Parents' Lives (in percentages)

	<i>Worse</i>	<i>Same</i>	<i>Better</i>
Overall quality of life	9	39	52
Financial well-being	22	34	45
Career achievements	12	42	47
Personal relationships	4	39	58

IEWS OF THEIR PERSONAL FUTURES

The questionnaire results indicated that overwhelmingly, the emerging adults believed their lives would be as good or better than their parents' lives had been (see Table 2). This was true for overall quality of life, $\chi^2(2, N = 138) = 41.2, p < .001$, as well as for the specific areas of financial well-being, $\chi^2(2, N = 139) = 11.1, p < .01$; career achievements, $\chi^2(2, N = 139) = 30.3, p < .001$; and personal relationships, $\chi^2(2, N = 139) = 62.6, p < .001$. A majority believed that their overall quality of life (52%) and their personal relationships (58%) would be better than their parents' had been. 45% believed that their financial well-being would be better than their parents' had been, and 47% believed that their career achievements would be better. The finding that slightly less than half believed their financial well-being would be better than their parents was nearly identical to the results of a similar question in a national poll in 1996 by Yankelovich partners (Hornblower, 1997).

Further insights into the meaning of their responses on the questionnaire were provided in their interview responses to the question, "Do you think your life, overall, is likely to be better or worse than your parents' lives have been?" Several themes emerged in the interviews. One theme was that when emerging adults indicated that they expected their lives were going to be the same as their parents' lives, this was typically a highly optimistic response because it was the response of emerging adults who viewed their parents' lives in highly favorable terms. In other words, "the same as parents" meant a happy and successful life. For example, a 24-year-old woman responded:

I would be very, very content if it was the same. I definitely don't want it to be worse, that's for sure. And I don't know if it could be any better. They have a great life.

Similarly, a 24-year-old man answered:

I think it will be about the same, actually. I want it to be. I think they've been a great example. I think they're wonderful people and they've given a lot to this world.

A second theme in the interviews was that financial well-being was secondary to other aspects of their hopes for the future, especially for emerging adults whose parents had been financially successful. For example, a 27-year-old man who was a singer in a rock band and whose father had been a biology professor indicated that he would probably not make as much money as his father but that it did not matter in terms of his future happiness:

I have meager needs. The things that I'm looking for in life aren't going to come with a bunch of money and a big house . . . I don't think I'll make as much money as him, but I don't need as much either.

A 25-year-old man believed the overall quality of his life would be better in comparison to that of his father, who was a successful and wealthy physician:

As I view it, yes, my quality of life will be better. I don't think my dad's happy. He thinks he's happy, but he's on a grind. He's on a rat race. The good side is he's in a profession that helps people. . . . But personally, all these career things that have to be done, I don't know. I think I'm able to step back, so I think I'll be able to be more happy, and that translates into a higher quality of life. I won't be anywhere as wealthy as they will; I've accepted that. . . . That's the whole point of most fathers' lives is to make their son's life better, and we're reaping the benefit of that. I'm able to choose not to be rich because I know what it's like. I know I can live without it.

However, this view depended to some extent on the economic status of the parents. Those whose parents were not as wealthy tended to place more value on the attainment of financial security, and were

more likely to see their future lives as better financially and occupationally. In the quantitative analyses, those whose fathers' education was relatively lower were more likely to believe that their lives would be better than their parents' lives financially, $\chi^2(8, N = 118) = 28.20, p < .001$; in terms of career achievements, $\chi^2(8, N = 118) = 30.28, p < .001$; and overall, $\chi^2(8, N = 118) = 30.21, p < .001$. (A similar pattern was found with respect to mother's education.) For example, this 25-year-old woman saw her and her husband's financial success as part of a sequence of generational progress:

[My parents] both came from hard childhoods and they made a lot of their life. And I think their lives were better than their parents' lives, and I think it can only get better. I mean, they've brought us up to a stage higher than what they were, and I think that I can bring myself up higher than the stage that they were. I think with [my husband] and I both having all this education, we would be having jobs that will put us in a little higher bracket than them. So financially, I think we'll be a little better off.

Overall, however, the results of the interviews suggest that poll results indicating that emerging adults are materialistic and prize financial well-being may be misleading. It appears that although they like having material things and would prefer to be well-off financially, for many of them, that goal is secondary to their enjoyment of their work and to their more general pursuit of happiness. Similar results have been found in other studies of American's views of work (Colby, Sippola, & Phelps, in press; Jensen, 1998).

It should be added that the views of this sample on their financial futures may be different than the views of emerging adults from other parts of American society. The emerging adults in this study were predominantly White (94%), and the majority of them had at least one parent with a college degree. Would views of their personal futures be different, more pessimistic, among emerging adults who were from lower social classes and/or who were members of ethnic minorities? Perhaps. It is interesting to note that in this study, those from relatively low socioeconomic backgrounds were more optimistic than others about their personal futures (in relation to their parents' lives). Similar results were reported in a recent study of college students' views of their futures (Eskilson & Wiley, 1999).

It is possible that there are relations between social class and ethnicity in emerging adults' views of the future. Studies of young African Americans have shown that those from lower social classes are more optimistic about their prospects of succeeding in American society than those from the middle class, because those in the middle class are more likely to have had direct experience with racism from Whites as a result of having more daily contact with them (Hochschild, 1996). However, this study cannot speak to the experience of emerging adults in ethnic minorities except to suggest that their views of the future would be an intriguing topic for further investigation.

A third theme in the interviews was the preeminence of personal relationships as a basis for happiness. Of the four questions on the questionnaire comparing their future lives with their parents' lives, the emerging adults were most likely to think their lives would be better than their parents' lives in terms of personal relationships. (Binomial tests showed that only for the question on personal relationships were emerging adults more likely to answer "better" than "the same," $p < .05$.) In response to the interview question as well, this theme was prominent. Personal relationships, especially the marriage relationship, were seen as the ultimate source of happiness by many of them.

This was especially true for those who had come from a family in which the parents had divorced or had had frequent conflicts. They emphatically believed that their own marriages would be better. Samuel Johnson is often quoted as having said, "Remarriage is the triumph of hope over experience." For this generation of emerging adults, even a first marriage often represents such a triumph. On the questionnaire, participants whose parents had divorced were more likely than participants from nondivorced families to believe their personal relationships would be better than their parents' had been, $\chi^2(2, N = 137) = 9.90, p < .01$. It was only with respect to personal relationships—and not with respect to financial well-being, career achievements, or their overall lives—that participants from divorced families were more likely than those from nondivorced families to believe their lives would be better than their parents' lives.

This view was also evident in interview responses. For example, a 24-year-old woman asserted: "I think [my life is] going to be better [than my parents']. I don't foresee a divorce in my future." Similarly, a 26-year-old man said he thought his life would be

better. . . . I don't think about it so much financially. I think about it more from a personal standpoint. The fact that they got divorced, I consider that as not being successful and therefore I obviously hope that does not happen to me. So in that respect, I expect it to be better.

A 29-year-old man responded:

Mentally, it will be better . . . I ain't going to divorce Chris. She'd have to kill me to get rid of me, you know, because she's a one of a kind woman, you know. I've never met anybody like her. Like I said, I can just see us staying together just like this, always getting along.

A 26-year-old woman hoped to succeed in this respect where her friends had failed:

I think it's going to be better. I'm hoping to have a marriage that lasts forever. I know too many of my friends who have gotten married and gotten divorced already, and I don't want that to happen. I want to be one of those people that are married for 60 years or something.

In sum, the emerging adults in this study viewed their personal futures with high hopes. With few exceptions, they expected their lives to be as good or better than their parents' lives. When they talked about their occupational futures, they emphasized the importance of finding personal satisfaction in their work rather than seeking jobs that would provide financial well-being first and foremost. Personal relationships, especially marriage, were viewed by them as the most important component of their future happiness, and the majority of them believed that they would be more successful in this respect than their parents had been.

VIEWS OF GENERATION X

Overall, the questionnaire results in combination with the interview results indicated a considerable amount of optimism among the participants with respect to their personal lives. However, they tended to see their generation's prospects in much more pessimistic terms. The question was, "Some people have called your generation 'Generation

X' and said that one of the distinctive characteristics of your generation is that you tend to be cynical and pessimistic about the future. Do you think this is true of your generation, or not?" Of the participants, 59% agreed with the characterization of their generation as cynical and pessimistic, whereas 22% disagreed (the other 19% gave ambiguous or uncodable responses). The difference in the proportion of "agree" and "disagree" responses was significant in a binomial test ($p < .001$). Chi-square analyses indicated that there were no differences among participants in their responses to this question with respect to age, gender, marital status, parenthood status, father's education, mother's education, parental divorce, or their responses to any of the four questions concerning their views of their personal futures.

The reasons many of them viewed their generation as cynical and pessimistic were varied, but common responses included limited economic opportunities and increased awareness of societal problems such as crime and environmental destruction. Although most of them viewed their personal financial and career prospects as bright (as we have seen), many of the participants viewed their generation's economic prospects as bleak. A 23-year-old woman stated,

I think we're kind of, in some ways, the lost generation. We all were brought up to think, "You finish high school, you go to college, you get a degree, and you go out to work," just like our parents did. Then when we get to college, we realize we don't know what we want, and we still don't know. We graduate with a degree we didn't want. I would say probably 7 out of 10 of my friends do that right now; they've already had their degrees and have jobs totally unrelated to their field.

A 27-year-old man had a similar view and gave it a political lineage:

I guess it comes from growing up during the 70s with Watergate and all the problems with Carter. Then you start college and you've got Reagan who's slashing everything in education, and you just kind of think, "Well, they're trying to do everything they can just to knock us down a little bit, to keep the haves and the have nots further apart," and it seems a lot now that you've got people with college degrees that work in McDonald's, you know. There's nowhere to go when you get out of school because all the jobs are already taken.

These views support the perspective of Cote and Allahaar (1994), who attacked *credentialism*, the increased requirement for educational degrees simply for the sake of the credential, although the material learned in the course of obtaining the degree often has little relationship to the skills necessary for the jobs young people end up taking. Cote and Allahaar (1994) also argued that more higher education graduates are produced than the economy demands, so that many graduates—in their analysis, close to half—end up underemployed after graduation with jobs that require lower levels of skill than their education has provided them.

A second common theme of pessimism was increased awareness of problems such as crime and the destruction of the environment. For example, a 28-year-old woman saw a variety of formidable problems in the world around her:

There's so many things going on in the world that are so horrible now that haven't always been going on. . . . Things from the ozone layer, to overcrowding, to natural disasters, to AIDS and hunger and poverty, all those things.

With respect to these sorts of problems too, the participants could see the world as grim even when they viewed their own lives optimistically. Another 28-year-old woman explicitly contrasted the conditions of her own life with the conditions of the world as a whole:

I feel like I work very hard to be positive about what I have firm control over, and that's my life and how I lead my life and how I behave toward people around me. But I have a lot of concerns about society as a whole. I mean, I guess you could say that I am, deep down, pessimistic about events happening in the world. . . . Crime and guns scare me to death. . . . I've always been careful, but I've never had an edge of fear on me, and I think I have that now. And that makes me real pessimistic that society has come to that and especially makes me scared about the idea of ever having a family of my own, because if it's like this now, what will it be 10 or 20 years from now in terms of trying to raise a family?

Similarly, this 24-year-old man hoped to preserve his prospects and those of his family in the face of difficult conditions in the world:

I think the nation as a whole is really headed for some tough stuff. . . . Just picking up the paper or watching the news, it kind of gets you down on the future, you know. You hear about all these kids with their guns in school. . . . It doesn't leave you with too much hope, but I try not to get down about it. . . . I mean, it's going to affect everybody, all this stuff that's going on, but I think if I raise my kids the way that I was raised, in what I believe is the truth, then I think they'll have an advantage over the other kids.

However, participants sometimes stated that it was not so much that societal problems had actually become worse but that awareness of the problems had increased in their generation due to pervasive media coverage. A 24-year-old man found his optimism difficult to sustain in the face of the media:

I try to be pretty optimistic about things, but then I like to watch the news too, and sometimes you have to be pessimistic about some of that stuff you see. It's like it's never going to change, you know.

This view was echoed by a 24-year-old woman:

It seems like the world just isn't as safe a place anymore. There's more violence on TV, and everywhere you go, it's there. People are more on guard much of the time.

The views of this 25-year-old man were similar:

Overpopulation . . . crime, and all that stuff. Just the way governments are; just everything. . . . It's a big mess. And I think, just through media and stuff, it's in your face so much that I think that adds to it. I mean, I threw my TV out; I don't even watch TV. . . . I just try to deal with my little circle right in town here, and I'm having the time of my life, to tell you the truth. . . . As far as being happy, it doesn't take a lot to make me happy, but as far as the whole world picture goes, it's a lot more crazy.

These comments provide support for the cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994), which has proposed that television distorts the way people view the condition of the society around them. A variety of studies have demonstrated an aspect of

the cultivation hypothesis known as the "Mean World Syndrome," which states that people who watch relatively large amounts of television are more likely than others to see the world as dangerous, violent, and crime ridden. This has been found to be true for both children (Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984) and adults (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1980, 1986). The comments shown above indicate that in the views of some emerging adults, watching television contributes to a perception of the world as dangerous and filled with problems. However, it should be added that this was a theme that came up in response to a question that was not specifically about media or television. It would take further, more systematic investigation of this issue to determine how widespread this view is among emerging adults and to assess the contribution of television to their pessimism in relation to other factors.

There were also emerging adults who agreed that many in their generation were cynical and pessimistic, but who dissented from this view themselves, sometimes quite vehemently. As one 21-year-old man stated,

I recycle as much as the next guy, but I really don't see the world as just becoming covered with garbage or the ozone layer disappearing. I really think it may have been exaggerated. It just seems like a lot of my generation just likes to whine about the horrible world that they were left by the generation before, but I think the generation before had to worry about nuclear war and stuff like that a lot more than my generation does now. I think if anything the world's gotten better in the past 50 years than it had been before.

Some of those who dissented also believed implicitly in the cultivation hypothesis. For example, this 24-year-old man stated,

I think we're bombarded with a sense of helplessness. If it's not homosexuality, it's the great whales or the ozone layer . . . [The media] just bombard us with negatives. Violence, crime, everything. Guns, drugs, disease. [But the truth is that] we are not in trouble. . . . Life is not in the balance. We're all not going to fall off the face of the earth tomorrow like we would be made to believe. I think a lot of people my age buy into everything the media says. . . . Our generation was raised by the television. We weren't raised by our parents in a lot of instances. . . . I don't think that anybody realizes how affected they are.

Furthermore, although a majority of participants agreed with the Generation X description of their generation as cynical and pessimistic, a substantial proportion (22%) disagreed with this view, not just as applied to themselves but as applied to their generation as a whole. For example, this 28-year-old woman stated,

No. Not at all, because I think maybe the generation before us was pessimistic and that's why we're now having to be more optimistic and set our sights a little differently. This is the recycling generation, this is the plan-for-our-future generation.

Overall, however, participants agreed that their generation sees the world pessimistically and has good reason to see it that way.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Emerging adulthood is a time when, for many young people, questions about the future are paramount. Of course, ruminating about the future is part of the human condition, and people of all ages speculate about what their lives may be like 1 year, 5 years, and many years into the future. However, questions about the future are especially salient for emerging adults because for many of them, major decisions in love, work, and worldviews have yet to be made (Arnett, in press). Even for those who have made these decisions and entered adult roles, as most of them have by their late 20s, the majority of their adult lives lie ahead of them, and the fate of their early aspirations has yet to be determined.

The results of this study show a sharp distinction between how they view their personal futures and how they view their generation's perspective on the future. The study provides some support for the Generation X view that there is a cynical and pessimistic generational identity among young Americans currently in their 20s. Many young people do believe that their generation is cynical and pessimistic. They hear this view articulated by their peers and in the media, and many of them share this view themselves. They realize that a college degree is by no means a guarantee of finding a satisfying, fulfilling occupation. They worry about crime and a variety of other societal problems, and they wonder if they will be able to protect their children

from being harmed by those problems. Some of them believe that the media inflate the extent of the problems in American society and resent the way they believe the media "bombard us" with news about the problems. But they feel there is no escape from the bombardment and, ultimately, no escape from living with the fear that those problems may one day harm them and those close to them.

Even amidst what they see as a grim world, however, most emerging adults maintain high hopes for their personal futures. A large proportion of them believe that their lives will be better than their parents' lives have been, in a variety of respects. Even when they believe the quality of their lives is likely to be the same as their parents' lives, this tends to be an optimistic response because it is often stated by emerging adults who see their parents' lives in a favorable light. Having a life like their parents' lives means having a life of personal success and happiness.

Where their parents have succeeded in life, they generally believe they will do just as well. Where their parents have failed, especially for those with parents whose marriages have failed, they believe they will do better. None of them believe that their own marriages will be among some 60% of first marriages forecasted to end in divorce. Financially too, they are optimistic, even if they have grown up in a family of relatively low socioeconomic status. In fact, in this study, social class background was inversely related to their views of their personal futures—those from relatively low social class backgrounds were even more confident than those from relatively high social class backgrounds that their lives would be better than their parents, financially as well as in other respects.

The optimism of these emerging adults is, in part, a reflection of the optimistic bias that exists for most people in most aspects of life (Weinstein & Klein, 1996). In general, people of all ages tend to believe that unpleasant events are more likely to happen to other people than to themselves. However, this view is perhaps especially easy to sustain in emerging adulthood, when so many things about their lives remain to be determined and when so many possibilities have yet to harden into accomplished facts. Although their views of their futures may be optimistic and may not accurately reflect the futures in store for them, their optimism arguably serves an important psychological function. The belief that they will ultimately prevail in their personal pursuit of

happiness, that their personal success is not only possible but inevitable, allows them to proceed with confidence through a world they regard as fraught with peril.

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