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## Storm and Stress Redux

### **Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, and Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before**

By Jean M. Twenge. New York: Free Press, 2006. 292 pp. Cloth, \$19.95.

Complaining about the young is an old, even ancient pastime. To Aristotle, being young was a state akin to being constantly intoxicated: “Youth are heated by nature, as drunken men by wine.” In Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, Act III begins with an old man grumbling, “I wish that there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest. For there is nothing in-between but fighting, stealing, wronging the ancestry, getting wenches with child.”

In psychology, too, from the beginning young people have been portrayed as a source of problems. G. Stanley Hall’s two-volume work *Adolescence*, published in 1904, was the foundation for the field of adolescent psychology. Hall’s volumes are marvelously diverse and in many respects portray adolescence in a positive light, but in the century since they have become best known for his assertion that adolescence is inherently a time of “storm and stress” (Arnett, 1999). According to Hall, the ages from 14 to 24 are the years when unruly behaviors of all kinds are at their peak.

Hall’s assertion of adolescent storm and stress, and especially his claim that it is universal and has an evolutionary basis, has been repeatedly challenged by other scholars, beginning with Margaret Mead’s studies of Samoan adolescents in the 1920s. Daniel Offer’s landmark studies in the 1960s showed that, in fact, most adolescents get along quite well their parents, are reasonably contented most of the time, and do not routinely spend their leisure time flouting public morals (Offer, 1969). More recently, a positive youth development movement has advocated looking at the sunny side of what young people are like. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that research on young people continues to be dominated by their problems: conflict with parents, depression and suicide, substance use, crime, and risky sexual behavior.

1 In popular media as well, the young have long been portrayed as dangerously  
2 unruly, constantly threatening to capsize the boat of adult stability and order. When  
3 the first distinct youth culture arose in the 1920s, jazz and the short skirts of young  
4 female “flappers” provoked alarm in newspapers and magazines from coast to coast.  
5 In the 1950s came rock and roll, starring Elvis Presley, whose hip-shaking sensuality  
6 made jazz look tame and was portrayed in popular media as simultaneously highly at-  
7 tractive and highly dangerous to youthful morals. In the 1960s youth culture reached  
8 a boiling point with the antiwar movement, the sexual revolution, and various other  
9 youthful protests against the way adults run the world. Popular media feverishly  
10 documented the excesses of the most extreme members of the youth culture and  
11 pondered what had gone awry in the development of the young generation.

12 Youth culture today looks tame next to the 1960s, but media portrayals of the  
13 young remain predominantly negative. The zenith of this negative coverage—or  
14 perhaps *nadir* is a more appropriate word—was a 2005 *Time* magazine cover story  
15 on the young people of today. “They Just Won’t Grow Up,” declared the magazine  
16 cover. The cover photo was of a young man in his early 20s sitting in a sandbox.  
17 His apparent crime, and the crime of the majority of his age-mates, was to wait  
18 until at least his late 20s before settling into the commitments of adult life, such  
19 as marriage, parenthood, and stable full-time work.

20 The latest entry into this tradition of youth bashing is Jean M. Twenge’s *Genera-  
21 tion Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, and Entitled—and  
22 More Miserable Than Ever Before*.

23 There are certainly some strengths in this book. Twenge is a lucid writer with a  
24 gift for acerbic humor. Too much of the writing in academic psychology is boring  
25 and turgid and manages to deaden even the most fascinating topics, but Twenge’s  
26 writing is consistently lively and fresh. She applies her razor wit especially to the  
27 self-esteem movement, with great effect. The most compelling parts of the book  
28 are the parts where she is analyzing and deflating the argument that self-esteem  
29 should be promoted among children, the higher the better. This has done before  
30 with more careful and extensive evidence, for example by William Damon (1986),  
31 but rarely has it been done with such verve.

32 Nevertheless, the book also falls short in a variety of respects, including its  
33 generational framework, its use of research evidence intermixed with highly dubi-  
34 ous material from popular culture, and its main argument that young Americans  
35 today are “more confident, assertive, and entitled—and more miserable than ever  
36 before.” I will examine each of these problems here.

### 37 **Generational misconceptions**

38 A basic question about Twenge’s approach is whether the phenomena she de-  
39 scribes in her book can usefully be conceptualized as generational. Here is how  
40 she describes her conception:

41 This book focuses on the current generation of young people, born in the 1970s,  
42 1980s, and 1990s, whom I call Generation Me. Right now in the 2000s, this group  
43 ranges from elementary school kids to thirty-something adults. Although thirty years  
44 is a longer-than-average span for a generation, it nicely captures the group of people  
who grew up in an era when focusing on yourself was not just tolerated but actively  
encouraged. (pp. 3–4)

However, it is questionable whether people from “elementary school kids” beginning at about age 5 to “thirty-something adults” extending presumably to age 39 can be understood as a coherent group. A 5-year-old is vastly different developmentally from a 39-year-old. Furthermore, it has been 34 years since the 39-year-old was age 5, and as Twenge herself shows repeatedly in the book, much has changed in American society since the early 1970s.

More importantly, in order for her generational scheme to work it would have to have an end as well as a beginning. As she concedes, 34 years is already longer than social scientists typically use to describe generations (20 years is the standard), but it could be as little as 34 years only if we believe that today’s 5-year-olds are different from their peers who are 4 years old and younger and would be part of some new generation. Yet as Twenge herself observes, today’s parents in their 20s and 30s are raising their children guided by the same individualistic values their own parents held in raising them, so there is little reason to think that what she calls “Generation Me” is about to be succeeded by some other distinct generation.

The generational framework she uses is an artificial and unsuccessful one for describing what life is like for young people today in American society. It is certainly true that American society has become more individualistic since the mid-20th century. This has been observed many times, perhaps most notably by Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985) in *Habits of the Heart*. However, this change in not merely generational, taking place among a distinct cohort with an identifiable beginning and end, but a long-term and continuous change that persists through the present.

In addition to the problems with the generational framework, the choice of the term “Generation Me” is regrettable. Why label them with a term that invites contempt and ridicule? Twenge explains her choice of the term this way: “Why the label Generation Me? Since GenMe’ers were born, we’ve been taught to put ourselves first. . . . GenMe is not self-absorbed; we’re self-important” (p. 5). She protests that the term is not intended to be derogatory. “This is not the same as saying that young people are spoiled. . . . I’m not saying this generation is selfish” (p. 5). Yet these protests ring hollow. There is little doubt that the term is derogatory and little doubt that Twenge portrays them as spoiled and selfish.

Thus “Generation Me” joins a growing collection of terms of ridicule for today’s young people, along with “adultescents,” “kidults,” and the odious “twixters.” In my view this ridicule reflects adults’ misunderstanding and discomfort with the rapid social changes that have take place in the lives of young people over the past half-century. Increases in the median ages of entering marriage and parenthood have been so steep that many adults still hold expectations that the young *should* settle down and “grow up” by their early 20s, as their parents and grandparents did, and are perplexed and unsettled when they see so many young people waiting until at least their late 20s and often their early 30s to enter stable adult roles in love and work.

I have proposed that these changes have resulted in a restructuring of the life course, so that there is now a normative period of “emerging adulthood” between adolescence and young adulthood, lasting from the late teens until the mid- to late 20s, during which young people in industrialized societies try out possible

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1 life paths in love and work and move gradually toward making enduring choices  
2 (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2006). Emerging adults are often self-focused because this  
3 is the period of the life course when people have the most freedom from social  
4 roles and social control, but there is no reason to apply derogatory terms to them  
5 while they are exploring possible life directions. I argue that the emerging adult-  
6 hood framework is a more fruitful way to think about the lives of young people in  
7 industrialized societies than “Generation Me” or other generational frameworks.  
8 Since I proposed the outline of a theory nearly a decade ago (Arnett, 2000), the  
9 term has become widely used in the social sciences.

### 10 **Conflating social science and popular media**

11 A second serious problem with the book is the way Twenge uses evidence from  
12 the social sciences and “evidence” from popular media interchangeably, which  
13 often results in a sensationalized and distorted portrayal of young people. Much  
14 of the social science research she presents is quite enlightening. This includes her  
15 own research, which focuses on meta-analyses of long-term patterns of change  
16 in American society on characteristics such as self-esteem, sexual attitudes, and  
17 gender expectations. For example, she shows that by the mid-1990s, the average  
18 college man had higher self-esteem than 86% of college men in 1968, and the  
19 average college woman had higher self-esteem than 71% of college women in  
20 1968.

21 Unfortunately, the credibility of the research she presents is undermined by the  
22 way she draws uncritically from claims and sensational stories found in popular  
23 media. For example, in discussing the alleged growing materialism among the  
24 young she claims that among college students “the new trend is designer dorm  
25 rooms with coordinated bedding and new couches” (p. 100). The only evidence  
26 for this “trend” is a *Time* magazine article. In another place, she asserts that the  
27 alleged rise in loneliness and isolation among the young “helps explain a new  
28 kind of get-together that’s popping up in cities around the country: cuddle parties.  
29 It’s a deliberately non-sexual (though usually co-ed) gathering where pajama-clad  
30 people can enjoy the hugs and touch of others, overseen by a ‘cuddle lifeguard on  
31 duty’ who keeps things friendly and nonthreatening” (p. 110). The only source for  
32 the claim that such events are “popping up” anywhere at all is a *People* magazine  
33 article. These are just two examples among many that litter the book.

34 Twenge’s frequent use of the detritus of popular media is puzzling. As an ac-  
35 complished methodologist she surely understands the standards of validity in  
36 the social sciences and the reasons for them. Social scientists adhere to common  
37 standards of validity—and peer review—precisely to avoid the kind of misleading,  
38 distorting, and false stories presented routinely in popular media, where the main  
39 standard is what sells best. Why she would choose to conflate her potentially valu-  
40 able analyses with tripe from popular media is mystifying. Perhaps this was done  
41 to make the book more eye-catching and digestible for a nonacademic audience,  
42 but it was done at the expense of the book’s academic credibility.

43 Not only are the stories she presents from popular media of highly questionable  
44 validity, but they are often presented at the expense of existing research evidence  
45 on the topics she discusses. For example, in chapter 6, “Sex: Generation Prude

Meets Generation Crude,” she repeatedly presents anecdotes from popular sources such as an NBC special on teens and sex, newspaper articles, television shows such as *The O.C.*, and something called *The Hookup Handbook*. The result is a portrayal of American adolescents as ripe and ready for sex with pretty much anyone at any time. The studies Twenge presents show that actually less than half of adolescents and emerging adults approve of or take part in recreational sex, yet never in the entire chapter do we hear from those who are among the majority. Furthermore, she claims, with only anecdotal support, that this recreational attitude toward sex is similar for girls and boys. “Not so long ago, a high school girl with a ‘reputation’ was a bad thing—now it’s a good thing” (p. 170). Yet this ignores abundant evidence that adolescent girls are often highly ambivalent about sexuality, especially about recreational sex (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Galen, 1999). It also fails to recognize that the sexual double standard remains strong, with recreational sex far more approved for boys and young men than for girls and young women (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

### Are they really “more miserable than ever before”?

What about Twenge’s thesis that young Americans today are “more confident, assertive, and entitled—and more miserable than ever before”? The first part of the thesis is easy enough to accept. As noted, it has been widely observed that American society has become much more individualistic in recent decades, and it is reasonable to expect that there has been a corresponding increase in the strength of personality traits that reflect individualism, such as confidence and assertiveness. Twenge’s meta-analyses show rises in recent decades in self-esteem and extroversion. Whether young people today feel “more entitled” than previous generations is more questionable. Twenge claims to show a rise in narcissism, but the items on the scale used sound more like confidence than narcissism (e.g., “I am an important person,” “I would be willing to describe myself as having a pretty ‘strong’ personality”). However, the evidence is reasonably strong that young people today have high expectations for their lives, so in that sense perhaps they can be said to feel “entitled.”

More problematic is Twenge’s claim that the young of today are “more miserable than ever before.” On the face of it, this seems difficult to square with the first part of the thesis. How could they feel both “more confident, assertive, and entitled” and “more miserable than ever before”? Are these not opposites as both states and traits? Twenge never addresses this contradiction. Moreover, the evidence she presents that they are “more miserable than ever before” is weak. She asserts that the incidence of major depression increased through the 20th century, but this is *lifetime* rate of major depression, not major depression in youth. She presents evidence from her meta-analysis showing that anxiety among college students has increased since the 1950s, but it has been widely documented that modern life feels more stressful to people of all ages, not just the young. She presents abundant evidence that young people face adult prospects of high housing prices, costly health care, and elusive child care—all of it true but none of it shown here or anywhere else to result in anxiety or depression among adolescents or emerging adults. On the contrary, the optimism of the young in our time with respect to

1 their prospects in life is remarkably strong, and this is in line with the first part of  
2 Twenge's thesis, about the strength of confidence among the young with respect  
3 to their futures. Furthermore, numerous studies, including longitudinal research  
4 by the national Monitoring the Future project, show that well-being increases dur-  
5 ing emerging adulthood—directly contrary to what Twenge's thesis would predict  
6 for emerging adults once they reach their mid-20s and encounter the vagaries of  
7 employment, housing, and health care in American society.

8 One other problem with Twenge's thesis that bears mentioning is her strong  
9 reliance on data from college students to represent emerging adults. This is un-  
10 derstandable, and quite forgivable, given that this is where most data on the 18- to  
11 25-year-old age period are found, especially for analyzing patterns that go back  
12 decades. However, it is less forgivable not to mention this issue and acknowledge  
13 the limitations of the data. Even now, with postsecondary enrollment at an all-time  
14 high, only about one fourth of emerging adults attend 4-year colleges and univer-  
15 sities of the kind that are the main source for Twenge's data on emerging adults  
16 (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006), and in previous decades the percentage was even  
17 smaller, especially for women. Twenge often mentions that her analyses included  
18 thousands or even tens of thousands of people, but this is unlikely to persuade  
19 anyone who knows anything about research methodology. An unrepresentative  
20 sample in the thousands is still an unrepresentative sample.

21 In theory and research on emerging adulthood, it has been emphasized from  
22 the beginning that 18- to 25-year-olds are highly heterogeneous and that hetero-  
23 geneity may be higher in many respects in this age period than in any other age  
24 period because of the lack of institutional structure and social control in these  
25 years (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2006). Furthermore, the lives of emerging adults vary  
26 greatly depending on their social class background, educational attainment, and  
27 ethnicity, even as they share some common characteristics (Côté, 2006; Hamilton  
28 & Hamilton, 2006). Yet heterogeneity in terms of social class and educational at-  
29 tainment is hardly ever mentioned by Twenge, and there is almost no mention of  
30 ethnicity until the penultimate chapter of the book. It is perhaps the best chapter  
31 of the book, but it is less about the lives of young people in ethnic minorities than  
32 about the majority's increasing tolerant views of minorities. Twenge's generational  
33 framework discourages recognition of the heterogeneity of the young because  
34 the more diverse they are, the more her assumptions of generational coherence  
35 become difficult to accept.

### 34 Conclusion

35 In sum, *Generation Me* contains elements of interest, but ultimately it is a disap-  
36 pointing book. It is doubtful that the world is in need of another storm-and-stress  
37 caricature of youth and another derisive term for the young. Twenge is right that  
38 the individualism of young people today is partly a consequence of growing indi-  
39 vidualism in American society in recent decades. However, the individualism of  
40 emerging adults is mostly a consequence of the fact that the age period from the  
41 late teens through at least the mid-20s has become a highly individualistic time of  
42 life, when young people are freer from social roles and institutional frameworks  
43 than at any other time of life. Their individualism reflects the appearance of a new  
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phase of the life course, emerging adulthood, not a transient generational change. Furthermore, most emerging adults relinquish their self-focused individualism by age 30 for the restrictions and rewards of adult roles: stable work, marriage, and parenthood.

There is much to be studied about the lives of emerging adults now that they are increasingly understood to be neither adolescents nor young adults. Although *Generation Me* is deeply flawed, this is Twenge's first book, and there is enough in it that is good to make the reader hopeful that her next book will make a substantial contribution to the understanding of emerging adults, if only she can keep the wit, drop the fluff, and add more gravitas.

### Response to Twenge

Twenge's review of my book *Emerging Adulthood* appears in the same issue of *The American Journal of Psychology* as my review of her book. Most of her review is devoted to a response to my review. There is much to object to in her defense of her book, but I will limit myself to these four points:

"It was never my intention that the book be seen as a condemnation of the generation." This statement is hard to believe. Did Twenge really not see—does she still not see—that "Generation Me" is a derogatory term and risks being picked up by others as a term of abuse? Furthermore, the book is littered with contemptuous remarks about emerging adults. They lack "basic consideration for others" (p. 26), they are "kids who can't take criticism" (p. 64), they "put the self first" (p. 109), they are "unsatisfied unless [they] earn heaps of money" (p. 131). It is unfortunate enough to see yet another snide, derogatory portrait of the young, but it is doubly unfortunate that the author refuses to take responsibility for it.

"It is ironic that Arnett would criticize *Generation Me* for its use of stories and pop culture examples, as *Emerging Adulthood* is enriched by the same types of examples." It is true that I occasionally use cartoons and examples from popular culture to illustrate my points in *Emerging Adulthood*. However, Twenge's use of pop culture materials is not comparable to mine. What I did not do in my book, and what she does repeatedly in hers, is to use the detritus of popular culture as the basis for the argument. I mention several of these in my review, and readers of *Generation Me* can find more with distressing ease.

"It is also odd that Arnett would say that some of the items on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) seem like normal personality traits. . . . Arnett's opinion is not supported by hundreds of studies showing that the NPI predicts an array of negative outcomes, from aggression after threat to lack of empathy." What is really odd here is that Twenge seems unaware of the distinction between face validity and criterion (predictive) validity. The fact that "hundreds of studies" find a correlation between the NPI and negative characteristics is irrelevant to the crucial face validity question: Does it measure what it claims to measure? I say the answer is no, and I invite readers to examine it closely and see for themselves.

"As for my reliance on college students, of course they are not a random cross-section of the young population. However, they are an important subset of each generation: those likely to be its future leaders." But Twenge does not present her book as a book about "future leaders" who are an "important subset" of emerging adults. Rather, the book makes sweeping generalizations and promotes negative stereotypes about an entire generation. To do so on the basis mainly of studies of college students at major

research universities, who represent at most 20% of their age group, is methodologically weak, and to fail to acknowledge the limitations of this method is a further weakness of the book.

As described earlier, Twenge's book has a number of strengths, and she shows great potential as a writer and social scientist. Unfortunately, however, the strengths of the book are ultimately overwhelmed by the weaknesses.

Although Twenge bristles at the way I placed her book in a long line of complaints about the young, alas, that is where it belongs. For Twenge and others who bemoan the lives of emerging adults today, it is surely inconvenient that the past 20 years have seen a decline in nearly every type of problem in emerging adulthood, from substance use to premarital pregnancy to crime. Recently the zealous political involvement of American emerging adults has refuted one of the last remaining clichés, found in Twenge's book and elsewhere, that they are too self-indulgent to bother themselves with politics. Fortunately, the growing literature on emerging adulthood is providing a much more balanced, valid, and positive portrayal of their lives.

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