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Generational Grumbling and the New Life Stage of Emerging Adulthood—Commentary on Trzesniewski & Donnellan (2010)

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Abstract

In this commentary on the article by Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010, this issue), I focus on the question of why young people today are viewed so negatively, despite the lack of evidence that they are worse (or worse off) now than they were in decades past. I propose that an important reason is the rise of emerging adulthood as a new life stage in between adolescence and young adulthood. Emerging adulthood developed in part because young people enter adult roles of stable work, marriage, and parenthood later now than they did in the past, leading many older people to view them as “late” or selfish, and the new features of this new life stage are frequently

misunderstood and misinterpreted. I emphasize that the rise emerging adulthood is not merely generational but is likely to be a permanent addition to the life course.

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Is there any basis for the widespread negative portrayal of today's young Americans as selfish, suffering slackers? Or is this a myth promoted by irresponsible researchers and hyped by credulous journalists? In their article "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976–2006," Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010, this issue) do a masterful job of presenting data that provide a definitive answer to these questions. The data show unambiguously that the claims made by Twenge (2006) and others are grossly exaggerated. American high-school seniors in the early 21st century are remarkably similar to their counterparts in the late 1970s. Despite many complaints about the decline of young people and their sorry state today, it turns out that the high-school seniors of 2006 are no different from the high-school seniors of 1976 on a wide range of variables, from self-esteem and life satisfaction to loneliness and antisocial behavior. Hopefully, the careful, thorough analysis in this article will drive a stake through the heart of the overhyped claims of Generation Me.

Trzesniewski and Donnellan have done their work well, and I have little to quarrel with in their cogent, comprehensive analysis. Instead, I will focus my remarks here on the interesting issue they raise at the end of their article: "Perhaps the more interesting psychological story concerns the persistence of beliefs about cohort-related changes when clear evidence of such effects is fairly limited and the positive effect sizes are small by

psychological standards” (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010, p. xx). If so little evidence supports the claim that today’s young people are worse in multiple ways than young people of a few decades ago, why is this claim so widely embraced?

Trzesniewski and Donnellan present a variety of good answers to this question themselves, but I wish to offer an additional answer that I think goes beyond what they offered. The reason young people in American society are perceived so negatively is not because high-school seniors in the early 21st century are much different from high-school seniors of the late 1970s, but because the period beyond high school really has changed dramatically over this time. Instead of entering adult roles of marriage, parenthood, and stable work shortly after high school, as most young people did in 1976, today most wait until at least their late 20s to make these transitions. Instead of going directly from adolescence to young adulthood, most now experience a new life stage, emerging adulthood, from their late teens to at least their mid-20s (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Arnett & Tanner, 2006).

Why would the rise of emerging adulthood as a normative life stage provoke grumbling about young people in this age period? I believe there are four main reasons: (a) the later entrance into adult roles by today’s emerging adults is misinterpreted by older adults as selfishness, (b) the identity explorations of emerging adulthood are misinterpreted as widespread suffering, (c) the search by emerging adults for identity-based work leads older adults to see them as slackers uninterested in “real” work, and (d) their high hopes for their lives are misinterpreted by others as grandiosity. Here I will explain why each of these beliefs about emerging adults is mistaken.

SELFISH OR SELF-FOCUSED?

Changes in the timing of entering adult roles have been rapid and dramatic over the past three decades. In 1976, the year Trzesniewski and Donnellan begin their analysis, the median marriage age in the United States was between 22 and 23 years old (Arnett, 2004). By 2006, the last year in their analysis, the median marriage age had risen to nearly 27 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007), an increase of over 4 years in just three decades. College participation also rose, especially for women. From 1976 to 2006, the number of young women entering college after high school doubled, and by 2006 two thirds of women entered college after high school and 57% of American undergraduates were female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). College participation among young men also rose during this interval, although less dramatically.

One consequence of these changes, lightning fast in historical terms, was the opening up of the new life stage of emerging adulthood between adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2004). The rise of this new life stage has take place so quickly that many people find it disconcerting, which causes them to view emerging adults negatively. The parents and grandparents of today's emerging adults may be tempted to apply the norms of their time to their progeny. "By the time I was 23," they may think, "I was married, had a child on the way, and had been working in a stable job for 5 years. Yet these kids are around that age now and seem nowhere near any of those transitions. What's wrong with them? Why are they so selfish?"

But seeing them as selfish is a consequence of applying obsolete norms to the present and of an unjustifiably negative view of the characteristics of the new life stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007). One of the features I have proposed as developmentally distinctive about emerging adulthood is the *self-focused age*, meaning

that is the time of life in which there is the least social control from binding relationships and the greatest scope for making independent decisions (Arnett, 2004). But this does not mean they are selfish. On the contrary, they tend to be considerably less egocentric than adolescents and much better at taking others' perspective, most notably their parents' (Aquilino, 2006). They are self-focused during emerging adulthood because they are immersed in their identity explorations and on building the skills they will need for adult life. Also, they realize—wisely—that they have freedom for self-directed action in their 20s that they never had as children or adolescents and that they will probably never have again in adulthood. They neither expect nor desire to be self-focused forever, and the great majority have entered adult commitments of long term work, marriage or other partnership, and parenthood by age 30 (Arnett, 2004).

SUFFERING OR IDENTITY EXPLORATIONS?

The second reason for the negative view of emerging adults is that their identity explorations may be interpreted as suffering (Arnett, 2007). Identity issues may once have been the primary developmental challenge of adolescence, as Erikson (1950) proposed over a half century ago. However, in the early 21st century, it is during emerging adulthood, not adolescence, that most young people in industrialized countries explore the options available to them in love and work and move toward making enduring choices (Arnett, 2004). Identity explorations can be exciting and fun, but they can also be disorienting and confusing and are sometimes seen as suffering rather than as a normal part of the identity challenges of the age. This is true not only among older adults, but even among some emerging adults themselves, as the popularity of the “quarterlife crisis” idea attests (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

However, it is notable that numerous studies find that well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction all rise steadily over the course of emerging adulthood for most people (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). For a small proportion of emerging adults, serious psychopathology such as major depression increases in the 20s (Tanner et al., 2007), but most people appear to experience the identity challenges of the age as more exhilarating than onerous.

SLACKERS OR SEEKERS OF IDENTITY-BASED WORK?

A third reason for the negative view of emerging adults is their high expectations for work. They expect work to be not just a job but an adventure, not just a way to put bread on the table and a roof over their heads but a venue for self-development and self-expression. In short, they expect their work to be identity-based and something that provides a satisfying fit with their assessment of their talents and interests (Arnett, 2004).

How dare they! This seems to be the reaction of many employers and other adults to emerging adults' aspirations. Don't they know that work is supposed to be drudgery, something that employees are supposed to submit to at the behest of employers, preferably while keeping their mouths shut? Evidently, however, emerging adults appear not to have received that memo. Having grown up in a time of great affluence and economic vitality, today's emerging adults expect work to be enjoyable, and if the job they have fails to please them, they move on before long, unencumbered as they are by the responsibilities of providing for anyone but themselves. Perhaps this is indeed selfish of them, but it could also be seen as a long-overdue assertion of the interests of employees against the interests of employers.

GRANDIOSITY OR YOUTHFUL OPTIMISM?

Finally, one other reason for negative views of today's emerging adults is their high hopes for the future or what Twenge (2006) calls their "narcissism." I have found that high hopes in emerging adulthood are remarkably widespread (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Across ethnic groups and social classes, American emerging adults almost universally believe that eventually life will be kind to them. Even if life is not going so well right now—and often it is not, what with job changes, love upheavals, and financial difficulties—eventually all will be well. Everyone will find a job that provides a satisfying identity fit, pays well, and maybe even does some good in the world. Everyone will eventually find not just a mere flesh and blood marriage partner but a "soul mate."

Is this a new narcissism, or just the enduring hopefulness of youth, who have not yet had their dreams tested in the fires of reality? Trzesniewski and Donnellan find no evidence that self-assessments of intellectual abilities relative to peers have changed over the past 30 years. They did find that expectations for educational attainment have increased, but—and this is my one criticism of their article—they are too quick to concede that today's American high-school seniors "have higher and perhaps unrealistic expectations for their future" (p. xx). Actually, the high-school seniors' expectations are not unrealistic but a recognition of the fact that as a group they will certainly have higher educational attainment than their peers did 30 years ago. Furthermore, as Trzesniewski and Donnellan note later in their article, it is in fact highly realistic of them to recognize the changes in the American economy over the past 30 years from manufacturing to information and technology. It would, in fact, be dangerously unrealistic not to respond to the increasing economic reward for obtaining postsecondary education and the increasing penalty for failing to do so (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006).

Emerging adults today have high hopes, but it is hard to see why they should be denigrated for that. Few aspire to be professional sports heroes, musical superstars, or Hollywood icons, as adolescents often do. Their dreams are simpler: just the right job, and just the right love partner, and enough money to live well. Even as they strive for these simple dreams, they stay connected to the real options their lives present. I have found that, as they approach 30, they adjust their dreams without trauma to the exigencies of reality (Arnett, 2004).

CONCLUSION: NOT A GENERATION, BUT A NEW LIFE STAGE

In sum, the widespread negative portrayals of today's generation of young Americans are not based on trustworthy evidence that they actually are worse than the young Americans of 30 years ago. Instead, the main reason for portraying them negatively is that the life stage of emerging adulthood has grown up in between adolescence and young adulthood so rapidly that many people still not have adjusted their expectations to the new norm.

With the passage of years, it may be that emerging adulthood will come to be expected as a normative life stage, especially as more people who have experienced emerging adulthood become parents and grandparents themselves. Perhaps emerging adulthood will even come to be widely valued for the possibilities it offers for identity explorations in pursuit of ideals in love and work.

What seems certain is that emerging adulthood is not merely a generational phenomenon that will be gone in another 20 or 30 years, but a new life stage that will be normative in industrialized societies for the foreseeable future and increasingly in developing countries as well (Arnett, 2002). Widespread postsecondary education,

marriage and parenthood in late 20s or beyond, the search for a soul mate and identity-based work—none of these are likely to be reversed in the decades to come.

Generations—and glib generational generalizations—may come and go, but emerging adulthood is here to stay.

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