

Generational Differences in Young Adults' Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation, 1966–2009

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Three studies examined generational differences in life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation among American high school seniors (Monitoring the Future; $N = 463,753$, 1976–2008) and entering college students (The American Freshman; $N = 8.7$ million, 1966–2009). Compared to Baby Boomers (born 1946–1961) at the same age, GenX'ers (born 1962–1981) and Millennials (born after 1982) considered goals related to extrinsic values (money, image, fame) more important and those related to intrinsic values (self-acceptance, affiliation, community) less important. Concern for others (e.g., empathy for outgroups, charity donations, the importance of having a job worthwhile to society) declined slightly. Community service rose but was also increasingly required for high school graduation over the same time period. Civic orientation (e.g., interest in social problems, political participation, trust in government, taking action to help the environment and save energy) declined an average of $d = -.34$, with about half the decline occurring between GenX and the Millennials. Some of the largest declines appeared in taking action to help the environment. In most cases, Millennials slowed, though did not reverse, trends toward reduced community feeling begun by GenX. The results generally support the "Generation Me" view of generational differences rather than the "Generation We" or no change views.

Keywords: birth cohort, generations, intrinsic and extrinsic values, civic orientation, concern for others

"People born between 1982 and 2000 are the most civic-minded since the generation of the 1930s and 1940s," say Morley Winograd and Michael Hais, co-authors of *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics*. . . . "Other generations were reared to be more individualistic," Hais says. "This civic generation has a willingness to put aside some of their own personal advancement to improve society."—*USA Today*, 2009

College students today show less empathy toward others compared with college students in decades before. With different demands at work—hours answering and writing e-mail—people have less time to care about others.—*USA Today*, 2010

American society has undergone significant changes during the past few decades. Opportunities for women and minorities have expanded, and beliefs in equality for all have become more common (e.g., Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). On the other hand, societal cohesiveness is on the

decline, with more Americans saying they have no one to confide in (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006) and more having children outside of marriage (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011).

How have recent generations been shaped by these trends? At base, generational differences are cultural differences: As cultures change, their youngest members are socialized with new and different values. Children growing up in the 1950s were exposed to a fundamentally different culture than children growing up in the 1990s, for example. Thus birth cohorts—commonly referred to as generations—are shaped by the larger sociocultural environment of different time periods (e.g., Gentile, Campbell, & Twenge, 2012; Stewart & Healy, 1989; Twenge, 2006), just as residents of different cultures are shaped by regional variations in culture (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Many previous studies have examined generational differences in personality traits and positive self-views (e.g., André et al., 2010; Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010; Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2011). Fewer studies, however, have examined generational trends in values, life goals, and young people's relationships to their communities. For example, have young people's life goals changed to become more or less community focused? How concerned are they for others? How much do they wish to be involved in collective or civic action? These questions about community feeling are important, as they address crucial elements of social capital and group relations (e.g., Putnam, 2000). As the epigraph quotes illustrate, there is a great deal of interest in—and disagreement

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about—whether or not today’s young people are higher or lower in community feeling. Community feeling is also a key element of what Kasser and colleagues (e.g., Grouzet et al., 2005; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996) label intrinsic values, those important to inherent psychological needs that contribute to actualization and growth such as self-acceptance, affiliation, and community. These are on the opposite end of the same dimension as extrinsic values, those contingent on external feedback such as money, fame, and image. The current study seeks to expand the literature on generational differences by assessing changes in community feeling and the contrasting extrinsic values.

The literature on generational differences is limited in other ways as well. Most analyses have gathered data from other studies using cross-temporal meta-analysis instead of analyzing responses from large national surveys (e.g., Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Malahy, Rubinlicht, & Kaiser, 2009; Twenge & Foster, 2010). Cross-temporal meta-analysis has the benefit of examining changes in well-established psychological measures but lacks the stratified, nationally representative sampling of large national surveys. However, these national surveys have limitations of their own. For example, the meaning of some items in large national surveys is unclear. Although most items are straightforward or behavioral—for example, civic orientation items about political participation, or concern for others items about community service or charity donations—others, especially those asking about life goals, are more ambiguous. For example, when a respondent agrees that being a “community leader” is an important life goal, does that reflect the value of community (an intrinsic value) or of wanting to be a leader (an extrinsic value)? Several observers (e.g., Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007) have assumed it reflects community feeling, but this has never been confirmed by validating this item—or any other from these surveys—against psychometrically valid measures such as the Aspirations Index, the most established measure of life goals (Grouzet et al., 2005).

In the present study, we attempt to address these issues by (a) examining changes in community feeling across as many survey items as possible in (b) two very large national databases and (c) validating relevant items against existing measures, particularly those measuring community feeling and the larger dimension of intrinsic–extrinsic values. Before describing our research in detail, however, we discuss past research and commentary on generational changes in community feeling.

Opposing Views on Generational Changes in Community Feeling

Kasser and Ryan (1996) defined community feeling as helpfulness and wanting to “improve the world through activism or generativity” (p. 281). As the epigraph quotes show, the level of community feeling among today’s young adults is in dispute. The arguments fall into three basic camps: the “Generation We” view, the “Generation Me” view, and the no change view.

In the “Generation We” view, Americans born in the 1980s and 1990s, often called GenY or Millennials, are more community oriented, caring, activist, civically involved, and interested in environmental causes than previous generations were (Arnett, 2010; Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Rampell, 2011; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Winograd & Hais, 2008, 2011). Winograd and Hais (2011) wrote, “About every eight decades, a new, positive, accomplished, and group-oriented ‘civic generation’ emerges . . . The Millennial

Generation (born 1982–2003) is America’s newest civic generation.” Greenberg and Weber (2008) stated that “*Generation We is noncynical and civic-minded*. They believe in the value of political engagement and are convinced that government can be a powerful force for good. . . . By comparison with past generations, *Generation We is highly politically engaged*” (pp. 30, 32; emphasis in original). Epstein and Howes (2006) advised managers that Millennials are “socially conscious” and that “volunteerism and giving back to society play an important role in their lives” (p. 25). The view that Millennials are unusually inclined toward helping others is so widely held that many companies have instituted recruiting programs for young workers involving volunteer service and helping the environment (e.g., Alsop, 2008; Epstein & Howes, 2006; Hasek, 2008; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010; Needleman, 2008).

The contrasting “Generation Me” view sees Millennials as reflecting an increasingly extrinsic and materialistic culture that values money, image, and fame over concern for others and intrinsic meaning (e.g., Gordinier, 2009; Mallan, 2009; Myers, 2000; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011; Twenge, 2006). A few studies have found empirical support for this idea. American college students’ scores on a measure of empathy for others declined between 1979 and 2009 (Konrath et al., 2011). Malahy et al. (2009) found an increase over the generations in the belief in a just world, or the idea that people get what they deserve and thus are responsible for their misfortunes. They concluded that more recent students less likely to take the perspective of others in need and “less concerned with and less emotionally burdened by others’ suffering and disadvantage” (p. 378). Narcissistic personality traits, which correlate with less empathy and concern for others, increased over the generations among college students in four datasets (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010; Twenge & Foster, 2010).

A third view posits that generational differences do not exist, especially in representative samples, and that any perception of generational change is an illusion caused by older people’s shifting frame of reference or a mistaking of developmental changes for generational changes (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). These authors analyzed a selected portion of items in the Monitoring the Future database of high school students and concluded that few meaningful generational differences existed (Trzesniewski and Donnellan, 2010; cf. Twenge & Campbell, 2010). Trzesniewski and Donnellan contended that young people in the 2000s are remarkably similar to those in the 1970s. They argued that previous studies finding generational differences were unreliable because they were not based on nationally representative samples.

The Current Research

Our primary goal in the present research was to assess generational changes in community feeling. To address the limitations of past research, we took several empirical steps. First, given previous concerns about sampling (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010), we turned to two large, nationally representative samples of American young people collected over time: the Monitoring the Future (MtF) study of high school seniors conducted since 1976 ($N = 0.5$ million) and the American Freshman (AF) survey of entering college students conducted since 1966 ($N = 8.7$ million). Both include a large number of items on life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation.

Second, although much recent discussion has focused on the current generation of young people, we examine changes going back to

the Boomer generation. This will give a more complete picture of generational changes. Specifically, the time-lag studies we investigate can compare three generations at about age 18: *Boomers* (born 1943–1961), *Generation X* (1961–1981), and the current young generation (1982–1999; we will use the common label *Millennials*: Pew Research Center, 2010; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Unlike studies done at one time, these datasets can isolate changes due to generation or time from those due to age or development (Schaie, 1965).

Third, there are concerns about the meaning of the items used in these large datasets. We used a novel empirical approach to address this issue. Specifically, we validated the MtF and AF life goals items against established measures of extrinsic and intrinsic goals (e.g., Grouzet et al., 2005) and, to anchor these results to past research on generations, against measures of individualistic personality traits such as narcissism and general self-esteem (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Rosenberg, 1965). Without validation, it is difficult to interpret the meaning of life goals. As noted above, does wanting to be “a leader in the community” primarily reflect a desire to be a leader or to contribute to the community?

Fourth, we examined a comprehensive set of items on life goals and community feeling. No previous study has analyzed the MtF life goals items in their entirety, an important step as researchers recommend correcting for relative centrality to correct for response styles such as rating most life goals high or low (e.g., Grouzet et al., 2005). In addition, these studies are the first (to our knowledge) to perform secondary statistical analyses or effect size computations comparing the three generations on the AF items measuring life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation. The AF database is 18 times larger than MtF and begins 10 years earlier. In addition, of the nine concern for others measures in MtF (including 25 individual items), only one (charity donations) was examined previously (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). Most of the civic orientation items, including those on concern for the environment, have also not been previously examined.

Our three studies are as follows: Study 1 examines generational differences in life goals (1A) and employs a current sample to determine the relationship between these life goals and well-validated measures of intrinsic and extrinsic goals and individualistic personality traits (1B). Study 2 examines generational changes in concern for others, and Study 3 examines trends in civic orientation and social capital.

Study 1: Life Goals

In Study 1, we investigate generational differences in the importance of 14 life goals among high school seniors (in the MtF survey) and 20 life goals among first-year college students (the AF survey). We examine data from Boomers, GenX’ers, and Millennials at the same age, allowing the isolation of generational or time period effects from differences due to age or development (Study 1A). To determine the meaning of these changes, we validate the 34 life goals items against well-established measures of intrinsic and extrinsic life goals, narcissism, and self-esteem in a 2010 undergraduate sample (Study 1B).

Method: Study 1A

Respondents. We drew data from two larger data collection efforts that have surveyed young people over time: MtF and AF.

MtF. Monitoring the Future (Johnston, Bachman, O’Malley, & Schulenberg, 2009) has surveyed a nationally representative sample

of high school seniors every year since 1975; the datafiles are available beginning with 1976. MtF samples high schools across the United States chosen to represent a cross-section of the U.S. population in region, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The survey uses a multistage random sampling procedure to select high schools and then students to complete the survey. The participation rate of schools is between 66% and 80%, and the student participation rate is between 79% and 83% (Johnston et al., 2009). Schools that decline to participate are replaced by schools with similar demographic characteristics. About 15,000 high school seniors are sampled each year in the spring. Most respondents are 17 or 18 years old. The sample is divided into subsamples of about 2,500, and each is asked a different set of questions, called a form. The life goals items we analyze in this study were asked on Form 1 (total $n = 90,870$). When we conducted our analyses, the individual-level data were available for the data collections of 1976–2008.

AF. The American Freshman project, part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), has surveyed a nationwide sample of first-year students at 4-year colleges or universities in the fall every year since 1966 (Pryor et al., 2007). Originally, some 2-year colleges participated, but the data—including that for past years—are now reported only for students at 4-year colleges or universities ($N = 9,041,305$ from 1,201 college campuses; for most life goals items, $N = 8,675,833$). Most respondents are 18 years old. Data for campuses are included only if more than 75% of first-time full-time freshman students participated. The survey weights its results to be demographically representative of all first-year students at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States. The weighting is done in a two-step procedure: first to correct for nonparticipation within campuses and second to ensure that the campuses included are representative of 4-year colleges and universities in the United States. We obtained the aggregated data^{1,2} from four of HERI’s publicly available research reports: *The American Freshman: Forty-Year Trends* (Pryor et al., 2007); *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2007* (Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2008); *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2008* (Pryor et al., 2009); and *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2009* (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2010). These reports provide mean responses on the items for each year but do not include secondary statistical analyses or effect sizes. They are similar to the databooks reporting the MtF data.

Measures. MtF asks respondents, “How important is each of the following to you in your life?” about 14 life goals (see Table 1)

¹ We analyze the American Freshman data at the group level because the individual-level data were not available for many of the years of the survey. The individual-level data from 1966–1970 were not retained (Pryor et al., 2007). AF datafiles from 1999 and later are not publicly available, although researchers can apply to HERI for access to the individual-level data from 1999 to 2006. We applied to access the 1999–2006 individual-level data on these variables in April 2010, but were denied access. HERI currently does not allow any outside access to the 2006–2009 individual-level data. In contrast, the aggregate data are available for all years of the survey at the time of our analyses, 1966–2009.

² We estimated the individual-level SDs using the aggregate data. For example, if 60% of respondents agreed with an item in a particular year (and thus 40% did not), the individual-level SD of that sample is .49. The use of the individual-level SD makes the effect sizes in individual-level and group-level data identical.

Table 1
Life Goals of American High School Seniors, 1976–2008

| Specific goal | Boomers (1976–1978) | GenX (1979–1999) | Millennials (2000–2008) | d Boom vs. GenX | d GenX vs. Millennials | d Boom vs. Millennials | Change in rank Boom vs. Millennials | r with year |
|---|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--|----------------|
| 1. Finding purpose and meaning in my life | 0.69 (0.64) | 0.49 (0.70) | 0.41 (0.70) | -.29 | -.11 | -.40 | -3.00 | -.13 |
| 2. Being a leader in my community (E) | -.091 (0.75) | -.80 (0.79) | -.62 (0.79) | .14 | .23 | .37 | 0.89 | .15 |
| 3. Living close to parents and relatives | -.78 (0.84) | -.65 (0.87) | -.50 (0.87) | .15 | .17 | .32 | 1.00 | .10 |
| 4. Being able to find steady work | 0.71 (0.62) | 0.73 (0.57) | 0.60 (0.57) | .03 | -.23 | -.20 | -.22 | -.09 |
| 5. Having strong friendships (I) | 0.67 (0.66) | 0.61 (0.64) | 0.57 (0.62) | -.09 | -.06 | -.15 | 0.89 | -.06 |
| 6. Having a good marriage and family life (I) | 0.74 (0.78) | 0.71 (0.71) | 0.64 (0.67) | -.04 | -.10 | -.14 | 0.0 | -.06 |
| 7. Having lots of money (E) | -.28 (0.82) | -.10 (0.82) | -.17 (0.82) | .22 | -.09 | .13 | 1.33 | .01 |
| 8. Working to correct social and economic inequalities (I) | -.60 (0.76) | -.67 (0.76) | -.70 (0.78) | -.09 | -.04 | -.13 | -.1.89 | -.03 |
| 9. Discovering new ways to experience things | -.12 (0.75) | -.20 (0.74) | -.20 (0.74) | -.11 | .00 | -.11 | -.1.56 | -.02 |
| 10. Being able to give my children better opportunities than I've had | 0.47 (0.72) | 0.54 (0.66) | 0.54 (0.63) | .10 | .00 | .10 | 1.78 | .04 |
| 11. Being successful in my line of work (E) | 0.58 (0.67) | 0.58 (0.63) | 0.53 (0.61) | .00 | -.08 | -.08 | 0.56 | -.04 |
| 12. Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies (E) | 0.05 (0.73) | 0.04 (0.71) | 0.10 (0.69) | -.01 | .08 | .07 | 0.00 | .03 |
| 13. Making a contribution to society (I) | -.19 (0.71) | -.23 (0.70) | -.18 (0.69) | -.06 | .07 | .01 | 0.22 | -.02 |
| 14. Getting away from this area of the country | -.1.03 (1.01) | -.1.05 (1.02) | -.1.04 (1.03) | -.02 | .01 | -.01 | 0.00 | .01 |

Note. $N = 90,870$. Means are corrected for relative centrality. All d s .02 or over are significant at $p < .01$; all d s over .03 are significant at $p < .001$. All r s .02 or over are significant at $p < .001$. R anks are reverse signed, so a positive number means an increase in importance and a negative number means a decrease in importance. $I =$ an item positively correlated with intrinsic values; $E =$ an item positively correlated with extrinsic values. Items without these letters did not positively correlate with either.

with possible responses of *not important*, *somewhat important*, *quite important*, or *extremely important*. AF asks respondents to “Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following” about 20 life goals (see Table 2) with possible responses of *not important*, *somewhat important*, *very important*, or *essential*. AF varies the items included by year; we included all life goals that had been asked in at least one year after 2000 and at least one year before 1990. Most were asked in all but a few years. None of the life goals items were asked in 1988. “Raising a family” was not asked in 1966–1968, 1971–1976, or 1987–1988. “Helping to promote racial understanding” was not asked until 1977. “Becoming a community leader” was not asked in 1973–1991 or in 1993. “Participating in an organization like the Peace Corps or Ameri-Corps/VISTA” was asked only in 1969, 1970, and 2006.

Data analysis plan. We examined the average responses to each life goal within each of the three generations.³ As the average respondent in both surveys is 18 years old, 1966–1978 data are from Boomers, 1979–1999 data are from GenX, and 2000–2009 data are from Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Analyzing the data by generation addresses our main research question: Do the generations differ? We also report the correlation between each life goal and the year of data collection. This provides a measure of how linear the changes between generations are (i.e., the degree to which the changes can be plotted on a straight slope).

Previous research on life goals (e.g., Grouzet et al., 2005) recommends calculating the relative importance of goals, as some respondents may rate many goals as important and others may rate few as important. This response tendency may have also varied systematically over time. Thus we calculated relative centrality for each of the life goals in MtF by subtracting the grand mean for each respondent. We were not able to make these corrections in AF as the individual data were not available; however, the average response across all items was very similar for Boomers and Millennials (see Table 2; we were not able to perform this calculation for GenX, as the Peace Corps item was not asked at any time 1979–1999).

To provide another view of the relative importance of life goals, we noted the rank order of each life goal by year. For example, in the 2007 AF survey, “being very well off financially” was rated as important by 74.4%, the highest percentage among the life goals; thus it was ranked No. 1. We then compared the mean rank order for each life goal across the three generations. All 14 goals were asked in all years in the MtF survey, but only 16 goals were asked for most years in the AF survey between 1971 and 2007, so we were only able to compute rank orders for these 16 goals.

The MtF data were available at the individual level and AF only at the group level (e.g., mean percentage agreeing in each year). In both datasets, however, we used the individual-level standard deviation to compute t tests and d s for effect sizes. Thus the

³ We performed a factor analysis on the MtF life goals items, but it yielded a 5-factor solution for 14 items and a scree plot with a gradual decline after the 2nd factor and no clear cutoff. The factors also proved difficult to interpret, with several items not loading highly on any factor and some factors pairing seemingly unconnected items (e.g., having lots of money and having time for recreation and hobbies). Factor analyses could not be performed on AF as we did not have access to the individual-level data. Thus analyzing the life goals items individually seemed to be the best approach.

Table 2
Life Goals of American First-Year College Students, 1966–2009

| Specific goal | Boomers (1966–1978) | GenX (1979–1999) | Millennials (2000–2009) | d Boom vs. GenX | d GenX vs. Millennials | d Boom vs. Millennials | Change in rank Boom vs. Millennials | r with year (group-level) |
|---|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1. Being very well off financially (E) | 44.6% | 70.8% | 74.4% | .55 | .08 | .63 | 4.00 | .88*** |
| 2. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life (I) | 73.0% | 46.9% | 44.6% | -.54 | -.05 | -.59 | -3.13 | -.82*** |
| 3. Keeping up to date with political affairs | 49.5% | 38.6% | 34.6% | -.22 | -.08 | -.30 | -3.29 | -.81*** |
| 4. Having administrative responsibility for the work of others (E) | 26.1% | 40.8% | 39.1% | .31 | -.03 | .28 | 2.22 | .68*** |
| 5. Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment (I) | 32.8% | 24.0% | 20.9% | -.20 | -.07 | -.27 | -3.00 | -.50** |
| 6. Becoming a community leader (E) | 20.9% | 34.1% | 33.3% | .28 | -.02 | .26 | | .82*** |
| 7. Raising a family (I) | 64.6% | 70.7% | 74.7% | .13 | .09 | .22 | | .85*** |
| 8. Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my special field (E) | 43.1% | 56.0% | 53.6% | .26 | -.05 | .21 | 1.86 | .60*** |
| 9. Participating in an organization like the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps/VISTA (I) | 18.9% | 38.7% | 11.3% | .14 | .03 | -.21 | 1.75 | -.92 |
| 10. Influencing social values | 32.1% | 69.6% | 40.4% | .06 | -.22 | .17 | -1.29 | .74*** |
| 11. Becoming an authority in my field (E) | 67.0% | 16.9% | 59.3% | .10 | -.04 | -.16 | 1.41 | -.55** |
| 12. Making a theoretical contribution to science (I) | 13.2% | 25.7% | 18.5% | -.12 | -.01 | -.13 | -0.71 | .82*** |
| 13. Participating in a community action program (I) | 30.8% | 35.9% | 25.2% | -.05 | -.07 | -.12 | | -.40* |
| 14. Helping to promote racial understanding (I) | 38.1% | | 32.7% | | | | | -.29 |
| 15. Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts (acting, dancing, etc.) (E) | 12.6% | 12.8% | 15.7% | .00 | .09 | .09 | 0.71 | .70*** |
| 16. Influencing the political structure | 16.9% | 18.8% | 20.5% | .05 | .04 | .09 | 1.30 | .63*** |
| 17. Becoming successful in a business of my own (E) | 43.1% | 43.7% | 41.2% | .01 | -.05 | -.04 | 0.29 | -.40** |
| 18. Helping others who are in difficulty (I) | 66.2% | 63.5% | 65.2% | -.06 | .03 | -.03 | 0.29 | -.09 |
| 19. Writing original works (poems, novels, short stories, etc.) | 14.9% | 13.8% | 15.6% | -.03 | .05 | .02 | -0.93 | .36* |
| 20. Creating artistic work (painting, sculpture, decorating, etc.) | 15.5% | 13.1% | 16.0% | -.07 | .09 | .01 | -1.50 | .14 |
| Total average percent | 36.2% | | 36.8% | | | | | |

Note. N = 8.7 million. All ds .01 or over are statistically significant at $p < .001$. The rs are weighted by sample size and * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. The percentages are the percent in each generation who rated the life goal as essential or very important. Ranks are reverse signed, so a positive number means an increase in importance and a negative number means a decrease in importance. I = an item positively correlated with intrinsic values; E = an item positively correlated with extrinsic values. Items without these letters did not positively correlate with either or produced inconsistent results (e.g., positive correlations with one subscale and negative with another).

analyses comparing the generation groups were performed the same way in both datasets. The rank order analyses were also done in exactly the same way, comparing the average ranks in each year. The only difference appears in the linear r s and regressions to test for curvilinear effects, which are based on individual-level data in MtF and group-level data in AF. Group-level r s are sometimes called ecological or alerting correlations (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). However, that does not mean they are incorrect; they are simply based on a different level of analysis (see Twenge & Campbell, 2010 for a more extensive discussion). Regressions can also be interpreted in the same way in both group- and individual-level analyses, comparing the strength of linear and curvilinear effects.

Method: Study 1B

Participants. One hundred eighty-two undergraduates attending San Diego State University in spring 2010 participated for course credit in their introductory psychology class. There were 51 male and 131 female participants. Forty-eight percent were White, 24% were Latino/a, 16% were Asian American, 6% were Black, and 6% were multiracial. Average age was 21.35 years.

Measures.

MtF and AF life goals. Participants responded to the life goals items used in MtF and AF using the same wording and response choices.

Aspiration Index. Participants completed nine subscales of the Aspiration Index (Grouzet et al., 2005), including three intrinsic (self-acceptance, affiliation, and community), three extrinsic (money, fame, and image), and three closer to the middle of the circumplex (spirituality, conformity, and hedonism; we will not analyze these scales independently, but their inclusion is useful for computing relative centrality, especially as the MtF and AF survey items include some goals that are not clearly either intrinsic or extrinsic).

Self-esteem. We used the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Narcissism. We used the 40-item forced-choice version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Data analysis plan. To validate the life goals items, we will first examine the correlations between them and the well-established measures of aspirations, self-esteem, and narcissism. This method will tell us which life goals are endorsed by participants who score high or low on these established measures of extrinsic versus intrinsic values. For example, if “participating in a community action program” is endorsed by the same people who rate the intrinsic value of community feeling higher, then there will be a positive correlation between these two variables. Thus participants are not rating whether they think the life goals are intrinsic versus extrinsic per se; instead, this technique determines whether the life goals are related to intrinsic versus extrinsic values through the variance among individuals.

We will then examine the correlation between the generational difference in these life goals (in terms of d and changes in ranking) and the correlations between the life goals items and the intrinsic and extrinsic goals from the validation sample. This analysis will determine if the generational differences in life goals are associated with how much that goal is linked to the score on a measure

of intrinsic or extrinsic goals. For example, a positive correlation with fame would demonstrate that the more an item was related to fame, the more it was valued among Millennials (as compared to Boomers). This approach is similar to that used in to conduct personality profile matching (e.g., McCrae, 2008; Miller et al., 2010).

Results

Millennials and GenX'ers rated being very well off financially, being a leader in the community, living close to parents and relatives, and having administrative responsibility for the work of others as more important than Boomers did at the same age. They rated developing a meaningful philosophy of life, finding purpose and meaning, keeping up to date with political affairs, and becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment as less important (see Tables 1 and 2). The changes were primarily linear, with Millennials continuing, though often slowing, trends begun by GenX'ers (see Figures 1 and 2). The linear r s were smaller than most of the d s between generations, most likely due to year-by-year variations and some curvilinear effects (further discussion of linear vs. curvilinear effects appears later).⁴ In the AF dataset in particular, the most common pattern was a larger change from Boomers to GenX'ers followed by smaller changes between GenX and Millennials (see Figure 2).

The changes in rank order within year produced very similar results (see Tables 1 and 2). High school students ranked finding meaning and purpose in life No. 3 during the 1970s, which dropped to No. 6 by the mid-2000s. College students ranked the importance of being very well off financially No. 8 in 1971, but, since 1989, have consistently ranked it No. 1. Keeping up with political affairs was ranked No. 4 in 1971 and has ranked No. 9 since 1994. In chi-square analyses, nine out of the 14 life goals in MtF showed significant ($p < .05$) generational differences in rank order. Fourteen of the 16 AF life goals demonstrated significant generational differences. Thus, both mean levels and changes in rank order resulted in significant generational differences.

Correlations with intrinsic vs. extrinsic goals and individualistic personality traits. But what do these changes mean? Table 3 shows the correlations in a current sample of undergraduates (Study 1B) among the relative centrality ratings of the 34 life goals and the relative centrality ratings of three extrinsic subscales of the Aspiration Index (money, image, and fame) and three intrinsic subscales (self-acceptance, affiliation, and community) as well as two individualistic personality traits (self-esteem and narcissism). Tables 1 and 2 note which life goals correlated positively with intrinsic (I) or extrinsic (E) goals.

Many items are face-valid; for example, “having lots of money” correlated positively with money and image, and “helping others in difficulty” correlated positively with affiliation and community. However, “being a leader in my community,” the item with the largest mean increase between Boomers and Millennials in MtF,

⁴ In the MtF dataset, we examined whether the generational changes differed significantly based on gender, race, or SES (father's education level) and found that, for the most part, they did not. Although there are group-level differences in these variables (e.g., males and low SES individuals valued money more), the linear trend toward more extrinsic and less intrinsic goals was similar for all groups.

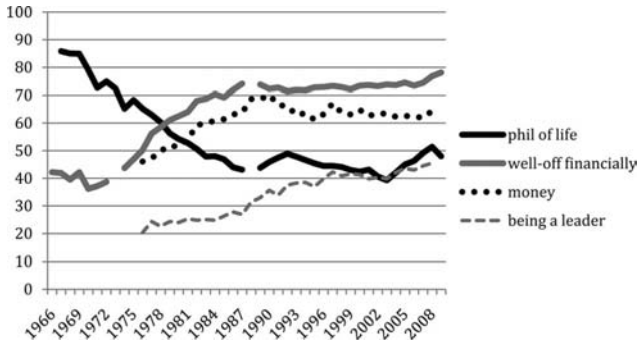


Figure 1. Importance of certain life goals, American high school and college students, 1966–2009. The y-axis shows the percentage agreeing the goal is important, uncorrected for relative centrality. “Developing a meaningful philosophy of life” and “becoming very well-off financially” are from the American Freshman dataset 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 dataset of high school students.

was positively correlated with fame, unrelated to community, and correlated $r = .40, p < .001$ with narcissism. Similar results appeared for the AF item “becoming a community leader.” “Developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” which decreased the most in importance over the generations, correlated positively with intrinsic goals and negatively with extrinsic, but “finding purpose

and meaning in my life” showed only a small negative correlation with money and no significant correlations with intrinsic goals. “Living close to parents and relatives,” rated higher by Millennials than by Boomers, was not significantly correlated with extrinsic or intrinsic goals—even affiliation. “Raising a family” and “having a good marriage and family life” were positively correlated with affiliation, though the first increased in importance over time and the second decreased.

To discern the overall pattern of change, we examined the correlations between the size of the generational difference between Boomers and Millennials and their correlations with intrinsic versus extrinsic life goals, self-esteem, and narcissism (also see Figure 2). These analyses addressed the question: Do the goals that change the most correlate most strongly with intrinsic or extrinsic life goals, and do they correlate with individualistic personality traits? Effect sizes comparing Millennials and Boomers for the 34 life goals items positively predicted their link to extrinsic goals (r for money = $.42, p < .05$; r for image = $.51, p < .01$; r for fame = $.40, p < .05$; r for extrinsic goals overall = $.58, p < .001$) and negatively predicted intrinsic goals (r for self-acceptance = $-.46, p < .01$, r for affiliation = $-.33, p = .06$, r for community = $-.37, p < .05$; r for intrinsic goals overall = $-.50, p < .01$). The results for changes in rank order, based on 30 life goals, were similar (e.g., r with extrinsic = $.57, p < .01$; r with intrinsic, $r = -.52, p < .01$). Thus, life goals related to intrinsic values were lower among Millennials compared to Boomers at the same age,

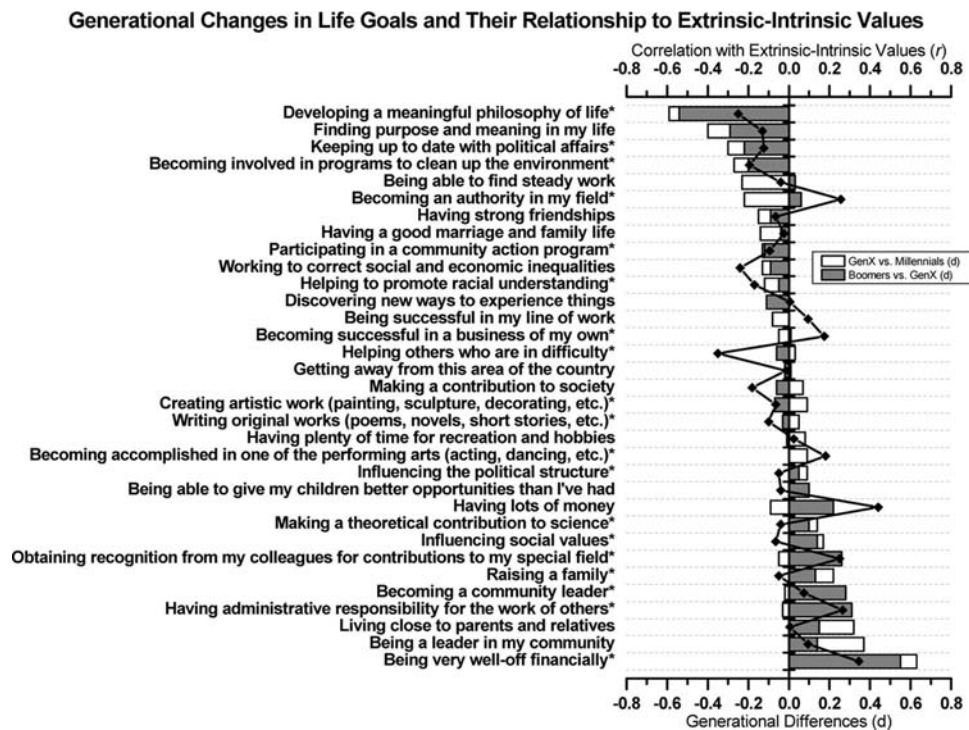


Figure 2. Generational changes in life goals and their relationship to extrinsic–intrinsic values. The bars plot the d for generational differences; the line plots the average correlation with intrinsic versus extrinsic values. A positive correlation represents more extrinsic values; a negative correlation represents more intrinsic values. The y-axis lists the life goals. An asterisk denotes data from the American Freshman survey of college students; all other data are from the Monitoring the Future survey of high school students.

Table 3

Correlations Between Life Goals, Aspiration Index Subscales, Self-Esteem, and Narcissism, 2010 Undergraduate Sample (N = 181)

| Study and goal | Money | Image | Fame | Self-acceptance | Affiliation | Community | NPI | RSE |
|---|---------|---------|---------|-----------------|-------------|-----------|---------|--------|
| MtF (high school) items | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Being successful in my line of work | .15* | .06 | .03 | .08 | -.10 | -.13 | .18* | .09 |
| 2. Having a good marriage and family life | -.04 | -.02 | -.20** | -.16* | .17* | -.15 | -.12 | .05 |
| 3. Having lots of money | .57*** | .36*** | .09 | -.22** | -.28*** | -.43*** | .11 | -.04 |
| 4. Having plenty of time for recreation and hobbies | .16* | .07 | .01 | .10 | .10 | -.04 | -.03 | -.01 |
| 5. Having strong friendships | -.15* | .04 | .01 | .02 | .27*** | -.07 | -.11 | .01 |
| 6. Being able to find steady work | .07 | -.04 | -.14 | .09 | .05 | -.05 | -.09 | .09 |
| 7. Making a contribution to society | -.25** | -.20** | .06 | .05 | -.05 | .34*** | -.08 | .06 |
| 8. Being a leader in my community | -.09 | .02 | .23** | -.11 | -.18* | -.01 | .40*** | .05 |
| 9. Being able to give my children better opportunities than I've had | .14 | .01 | -.20** | .07 | .02 | .02 | -.05 | -.02 |
| 10. Living close to parents and relatives | .05 | -.01 | .00 | .02 | .09 | -.06 | .01 | .16* |
| 11. Getting away from this area of the country | -.10 | .01 | .00 | -.05 | -.05 | .06 | -.13 | -.23** |
| 12. Working to correct social and economic inequalities | -.25** | -.17* | -.02 | .12 | .09 | .39*** | .11 | -.03 |
| 13. Discovering new ways to experience things | .02 | .05 | .12 | .07 | .01 | .09 | .11 | -.05 |
| 14. Finding purpose and meaning in my life | -.17* | -.13 | -.06 | -.05 | -.10 | -.08 | -.10 | -.08 |
| AF (college) items | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts (acting, dancing, etc.) | .02 | .15* | .12 | -.15* | -.15* | -.21** | .02 | -.08 |
| 2. Becoming an authority in my field | .13 | .21** | .19* | -.11 | -.15* | -.32*** | .30*** | .03 |
| 3. Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my special field | .19* | .23** | -.08 | -.08 | -.11 | -.27** | .21** | .08 |
| 4. Influencing the political structure | -.11 | -.03 | .00 | .02 | .04 | .03 | .00 | -.05 |
| 5. Influencing social values | -.26** | -.07 | -.01 | .01 | -.02 | .10 | .08 | .00 |
| 6. Raising a family | -.07 | -.03 | -.16* | -.10 | .19** | -.12 | .04 | .14 |
| 7. Having administrative responsibility for the work of others | .22** | .16* | .10 | -.19* | -.26** | -.27*** | .18* | -.07 |
| 8. Being very well off financially | .54*** | .28** | -.02 | -.21** | -.11 | -.39*** | .07 | -.03 |
| 9. Helping others who are in difficulty | -.24*** | -.23** | -.31*** | .19* | .25*** | .35*** | -.10 | .16* |
| 10. Making a theoretical contribution to science | .10 | -.07 | .09 | .06 | .01 | .20** | -.10 | -.13 |
| 11. Writing original works (poems, novels, short stories, etc.) | -.14 | -.07 | -.05 | .08 | .02 | .07 | -.05 | -.07 |
| 12. Creating artistic work (painting, sculpture, decorating, etc.) | -.14 | -.06 | .10 | .04 | .06 | .08 | -.18* | -.01 |
| 13. Becoming successful in a business of my own | .24*** | .05 | .17* | -.08 | -.10 | -.15 | .21** | .02 |
| 14. Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment | -.06 | -.24*** | -.17* | .17* | -.01 | .22** | -.22** | -.02 |
| 15. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life | -.22** | -.20** | -.22** | .20** | .16* | .15* | -.13 | -.07 |
| 16. Participating in a community action program | -.14 | -.03 | .00 | -.04 | -.01 | .24** | -.07 | -.06 |
| 17. Helping to promote racial understanding | -.16* | -.19* | .01 | .12 | .03 | .24** | -.09 | .15* |
| 18. Keeping up to date with political affairs | .18* | -.01 | -.24*** | .11 | -.04 | -.12 | -.17* | .06 |
| 19. Becoming a community leader | -.10 | .04 | .20** | -.09 | -.09 | -.03 | .24** | .03 |
| 20. Participating in an organization like the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps/VISTA | -.21** | -.01 | -.09 | .01 | .05 | .16* | -.27*** | -.06 |

Note. MtF = Monitoring the Future; AF = American Freshman; NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; RSE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

whereas those related to extrinsic values were higher. In most cases, Millennials continued, though at a slower pace, the changes that GenX initiated.

Next, we examined whether the trends in values were linked to two personality variables connected to individualism: self-esteem and narcissism. Self-esteem did not explain the changes ($r = .13$, $p = .47$), but narcissism did ($r = .51$, $p < .01$). When both are entered into a regression equation, the results are similar (β for narcissism = .50, $p < .01$; β for self-esteem = .03, $p = .84$). The results were also similar for changes in rank order (r for self-esteem = .09, $p = .63$; r for narcissism = .40, $p < .04$; β for narcissism = .39, $p < .04$; β for self-esteem = .02, $p = .93$). Thus life goals related to narcissism are higher among Millennials than they were among Boomers. When we included extrinsic-intrinsic values in the equation along with

narcissism, however, the beta for extrinsic-intrinsic values was significant ($\beta = .42$, $p < .04$) whereas the beta for narcissism was not ($\beta = .25$, $p = .20$). This suggests that extrinsic-intrinsic values, more than narcissism, explain the shifts in life goals.

These trends were primarily driven by the changes between Boomers and GenX'ers; correlations between the d s for changes between GenX'ers and Millennials and intrinsic goals, extrinsic goals, and narcissism were not significant. This suggests that Millennials continued the emphasis on more extrinsic goals (and less on intrinsic goals) at about the same level as Gen X'ers but did not reverse the trends.

Curvilinear vs. linear effects. We entered both a linear term (year, centered) and quadratic term (year centered squared) into a regression equation to predict each of the 34 life goals. We then

tested the associated beta weights to see if the linear or curvilinear models fit better.

The linear term was significantly larger than the quadratic term (at $p < .05$) for the majority of life goals. In MtF, 10 of the life goals had stronger linear effects, two had linear and quadratic effects of equal strength (“getting away from this area of the country” and “discovering new ways to experience things”), and two had stronger quadratic effects (“having lots of money” and “making a contribution to society”). The importance of money rose between Boomers and GenX and then declined (β for year = .03; for year squared, $-.06$; see Figure 1). Making a contribution to society declined from Boomers to GenX and then rose (β for year = .02; for year squared, $-.06$, see also Table 1).

In AF, 10 life goals had stronger linear effects, seven had linear and quadratic effects of equal strength, and three had stronger quadratic effects (“writing original works,” “creating artistic work,” and “helping others in difficulty.”) Unlike the quadratic effect for money in MtF, “being very well off financially” showed a stronger linear effect, with the rise continuing between GenX and Millennials (though most of the change occurred between Boomers and GenX). Helping others declined between the Boomers and GenX and then increased again for Millennials, although the increase was small ($d = .03$).

These results provide partial support for each of the three views. In support of the “Generation Me” view, the overall trend in life goals between the Boomers and the Millennials is toward less community feeling, including less intrinsic, more extrinsic, and more narcissistic goals, with Millennials continuing the trends begun by GenX and not reversing them. The overall pattern of trends does not support the “Generation We” view, though it receives some limited support in the small reversals in some items (e.g., money, making a contribution to society, helping others in difficulty). The significant generational differences in life goals do not generally support the generational similarities view. However, the smaller changes between GenX and the Millennials and the similarities on some items do demonstrate that not all life goals have changed at all time points.

Study 2: Concern for Others

In Study 2, we expanded our analysis to focus more specifically on the value of helping others. The MtF codebook includes a specific list of items measuring “concern for others,” and the AF survey includes several similar items. These include questions about helping others, having empathy for outgroups, contributing to society, understanding others, donating to charity, and volunteering and community service.

Method

Respondents. MtF asks questions across several different forms each year, so *ns* vary somewhat from one set of questions to the next; all *ns* were between 90,000 and 94,100. For AF, *ns* differed by question between 4.9 million and 7.7 million because some items were not asked during all years of the survey.

Measures. The MtF codebook divides the items on the survey into several sections, one of which lists 25 items asked in more than one year under the heading “Concern for Others” (Johnston et al., 2009, pp. 178–180; concern for others is Section O). Two of

these items were included in the life goals analyzed in Study 1 (“making a contribution to society” and “correct racial and economic inequalities”).⁵

Two items are included in a list of items about job attributes ($\alpha = .65$): “Different people may look for different things in their work. Below is a list of some of these things. Please read each one, then indicate how important this thing is for you.” Among the attributes are “A job that gives you an opportunity to be directly helpful to others” and “A job that is worthwhile to society,” with choices of *not important*, *a little important*, *pretty important*, and *very important*. Another item asks “Apart from the particular kind of work you want to do, how would you rate each of the following settings as a place to work?” with choices of *not at all acceptable*, *somewhat acceptable*, *acceptable*, and *desirable*. One of the items is “Working in a social service organization.”

A section on activities begins, “The next questions ask about the kinds of things you do in your spare time, that is, time not spent in school, or on homework, or on a paid job. How often do you do each of the following?” One of the items is “Participate in community affairs or volunteer work” with possible responses of *almost every day*, *at least once a week*, *once or twice a month*, *a few times a year*, or *never*. Data on this item are not available for 1990, as the Form 2 datafile is missing for that year.

Nine items ask about charity contributions ($\alpha = .79$): “If you have at least an average income in the future, how likely is it that you will contribute money to the following organizations? If you have already contributed, mark the last circle only. Are you likely to contribute to . . .” Items are “The United Fund or other community charities, International relief organizations (CARE, UNICEF, etc.), Minority group organizations (NAACP, SCLS, etc.), Church or religious organizations, Political parties or organizations, Citizen lobbies (Common Cause, Public Citizen, etc.), Charities to help fight diseases (cancer, heart disease, etc.), Organizations concerned with population problems (Planned Parenthood, ZPG, etc.), Organizations concerned with environmental problems (Sierra Club, Friends of Earth, etc.)” The possible responses are *definitely not*, *probably not*, *don’t know*, *probably will*, *definitely will*, *already have*.

⁵ Because the MtF survey administrators independently classified these items in their codebook as measuring concern for others, and most of these items are behavioral or face-valid, we did not undertake an extensive validation as we did with the life goals items. However, we did validate some of these items against the Aspirations Index in the sample from Study 1B. The item “In the United States, we put too much emphasis on making profits and not enough on human well-being” was positively correlated with intrinsic values ($r = .26$, $p < .01$) and negatively correlated with extrinsic values ($r = -.28$, $p < .001$), with the largest correlation with community feeling ($r = .36$, $p < .001$). The item “I would be willing to eat less meat and more grains and vegetables, if it would help provide food for starving people” was positively correlated with intrinsic values ($r = .26$, $p < .01$) and negatively correlated with extrinsic values ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$), with the largest correlation with community feeling ($r = .39$, $p < .001$). The two-item index about altruistic jobs (wanting a job “directly helpful to others” or “that is worthwhile to society”) was positively correlated with intrinsic values ($r = .22$, $p < .01$) and negatively correlated with extrinsic values ($r = -.20$, $p < .01$), with the largest correlation with community feeling ($r = .32$, $p < .001$).

Concern for others items also include “In the United States, we put too much emphasis on making profits and not enough on human well-being” and “I would be willing to eat less meat and more grains and vegetables, if it would help provide food for starving people,” both with the choices *disagree, mostly disagree, neither, mostly agree, agree*. A series of eight items asks about empathy for outgroups ($\alpha = .71$): “We ought to worry about our own country and let the rest of the world take care of itself” (reverse); “It would be better if we all felt more like citizens of the world than of any particular country;” “I find it hard to be sympathetic toward starving people in foreign lands, when there is so much trouble in our own country” (reverse); “Maybe some minority groups do get unfair treatment, but that’s no business of mine” (reverse); “I get very upset when I see other people treated unfairly;” “I would agree to a good plan to make a better life for the poor, even if it cost me money;” “It’s not really my problem if others are in trouble and need help” (reverse); “Americans could change their eating habits to provide more food for the hungry people in other parts of the world, and at the same time be healthier themselves.”

The AF survey asks a few questions similar to those in the MtF “concern for others” section. Three of the life goals from Study 1 are relevant: Helping others in difficulty, helping to promote racial understanding, and participating in a community action program. Two items inquire about community service work: “For the activities below, indicate which ones you did during the past year: Performed volunteer work” (asked beginning in 1984, with choices of *frequently, occasionally, or not at all*.) Another question, asked beginning in 1990, asks students’ “best guess as to the chance that

you will: Participate in volunteer or community service work”; the report gives the percentage who predict the chance is “very good.”

Students have been asked to report their “probable career occupation” since 1966; one of the choices is social worker. Finally, a series of questions asks students to “Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age. We want the most accurate estimate of how you see yourself.” One of the attributes is “understanding of others,” with choices of *highest 10%, above average, average, below average, and lowest 10%*. The report lists the percentage of students in each year who rated themselves as above average or highest 10%.

Results

Millennials and GenX’ers scored lower than Boomers on the majority of items measuring concern for others, though most of the differences were small (see Table 4 and Figure 3). Compared to Boomers, Millennials were less likely to have donated to charities, less likely to want a job worthwhile to society or that would help others, and less likely to agree they would eat differently if it meant more food for the starving. They were less likely to want to work in a social service organization or become a social worker, and were less likely to express empathy for outgroups.

In the sole significant exception to these trends, Millennials were more likely than Boomers or GenX to participate in community service during high school. In the AF survey, more Millennials than GenX’ers reported their intention to do community service during college, though this was fewer than those who reported high school service (83% of Millennials reported high school service vs.

Table 4
Concern for Others Among American Young People, 1966–2009

| Study and goal | Boomers (1966 or 76–78) | GenX (1979–1999) | Millennials (2000–2009) | <i>d</i> Boom vs. GenX | <i>d</i> GenX vs. Millennials | <i>d</i> Boom vs. Millennials | <i>r</i> with year |
|--|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| MtF (high school seniors) | | | | | | | |
| 1. Important to make a contribution to society | −0.19 (0.71) | −0.23 (0.70) | −0.18 (0.69) | −.06 | .07 | .01 | .02 |
| 2. Important to correct inequalities | −0.60 (0.76) | −0.67 (0.76) | −0.70 (0.78) | −.09 | −.04 | −.13 | −.03 |
| 3. Desire for job with altruistic attributes (index) | 3.27 (0.70) | 3.23 (0.71) | 3.17 (0.71) | −.06 | −.08 | −.14 | −.05 |
| 4. Desirable to work in social service organization | 2.48 (1.01) | 2.35 (0.97) | 2.31 (0.95) | −.13 | −.04 | −.17 | −.04 |
| 5. Participated in community affairs or volunteer work | 2.01 (0.98) | 2.07 (1.00) | 2.27 (1.05) | .06 | .20 | .26 | .07 |
| 6. Charity donations (index) | 3.40 (0.71) | 3.26 (0.72) | 3.16 (0.78) | −.19 | −.14 | −.33 | −.10 |
| 7. U.S. favors profit over human well-being | 3.86 (1.05) | 3.78 (1.08) | 3.74 (1.03) | −.08 | −.04 | −.12 | −.01 |
| 8. Willing to eat differently if means more food for starving people | 3.84 (1.28) | 3.71 (1.34) | 3.56 (1.37) | −.10 | −.11 | −.21 | −.06 |
| 9. Empathy for outgroups (index) | 3.73 (0.71) | 3.66 (0.71) | 3.66 (0.70) | −.10 | .00 | −.10 | −.04 |
| AF (first-year college students) | | | | | | | |
| 1. Did volunteer work in high school | | 73.9% | 82.9% | | .22 | | .89*** |
| 2. Expect to volunteer in college | | 21.8% | 26.1% | | .10 | | .94*** |
| 3. Expect to be a social worker | 2.7% | 1.2% | .98% | −.13 | −.02 | −.15 | −.77*** |
| 4. Above average in understanding of others | 66.1% | 69.0% | 66.2% | .06 | −.06 | .00 | −.13 |
| 5. Important to help promote racial understanding | 38.1% | 35.9% | 32.7% | −.05 | −.07 | −.12 | −.29 |
| 6. Important to help others in difficulty | 66.2% | 63.5% | 65.2% | −.06 | .03 | −.03 | −.09 |
| 7. Important to participate in a community action program | 30.8% | 25.7% | 25.2% | −.12 | −.01 | −.13 | −.40* |
| Mean <i>d</i> | | | | −.07 | −.02 | −.09 | |
| Mean <i>d</i> without volunteering | | | | −.09 | −.04 | −.13 | |

Note. Monitoring the Future (MtF) importance items corrected for relative centrality. For MtF, all *ds* .02 or over are significant at $p < .01$; all *ds* over .03 are significant at $p < .001$. For American Freshman (AF), all *ds* .01 or over are statistically significant at $p < .001$. For the AF items, *rs* are at the group level and are weighted by sample size.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

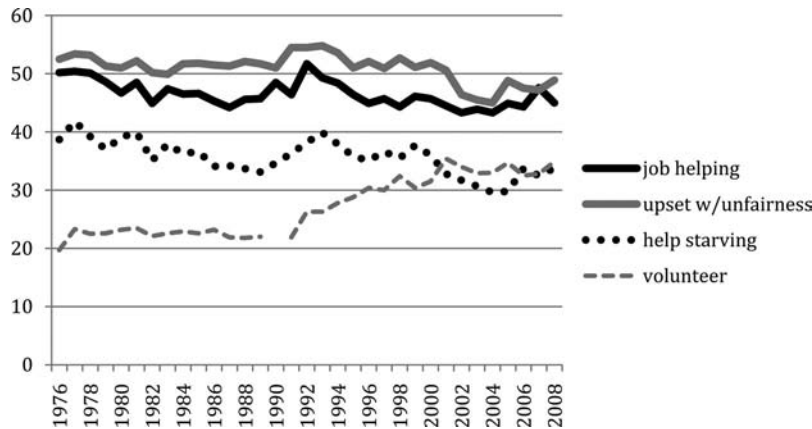


Figure 3. Concern for others among American high school students, 1976–2008.

26% who intended to do so in college). This lower number for college samples is consistent with findings from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which found that 43% of students had performed community service work in the previous 2 years at age 18, compared to 24% at age 20 (Planty, Bozick, & Regnier, 2006).

In regression equations, the linear term was larger than the quadratic term for all items except making a contribution to society and helping others in difficulty (discussed in Study 1) and being above average in understanding others, which increased from Boomers to GenX and declined from GenX to the Millennials. For the most part, Millennials continued the downward trend in concern for others begun by GenX.

In sum, Millennials generally score lower than previous generations in concern for others, but the differences do not approach the large effect sizes found for the decline in empathy over time (Konrath et al., 2011). This is mostly consistent with the “Generation Me” view. The “Generation We” view, which posited that Millennials would be more concerned for others than GenX’ers and Boomers, is consistent with the volunteer data but not most of the other measures or the overall effect size. If a cutoff of $d = .|20|$ is applied (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010), the generational similarities view receives some support from these items. However, a cutoff of $d = .|10|$ may be more appropriate, as Cohen revised his previous cutoff of $d = .|20|$ for a small effect to $d = .|10|$ to more accurately reflect actual effect sizes in psychology (Cohen, 1988). The generational similarities model receives less support if this revised cutoff is used.

Study 3: Civic Orientation and Social Capital

In Study 3, we expand our analysis of community feeling further to examine civic engagement, a crucial part of social capital and a functioning democracy (e.g., Putnam, 2000). Community feeling includes an interest in collective action, including political involvement and interest in government and social affairs (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). We also examined items on helping the environment, a civic endeavor purported to be a special interest of Millennials (Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Hasek, 2008).

Method

Respondents. We again drew from the MtF and AF databases. For MtF, *ns* varied between 90,000 and 94,100 depending on the item. AF *ns* varied between 3.3 million and 8.3 million.

Measures. We attempted to locate all items in MtF relevant to civic orientation and social capital. These included “Some people think a lot about the social problems of the nation and the world, and about how they might be solved. Others spend little time thinking about these issues. How much do you think about such things?” with choices of *never, seldom, sometimes, quite often, and a great deal*.⁶

Three questions tap trust in others ($\alpha = .61$): “Generally speaking, would you say most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” (with choices of *most people can be trusted; don’t know, undecided; can’t be too careful*); “Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?” (*Try to be helpful; Don’t know, undecided; Just looking out for themselves*); and “Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair?” (*Would try to be fair; Don’t know, undecided; Would try to take advantage of you*).

One item measures interest in government: “Some people think about what’s going on in government very often, and others are not that interested. How much of an interest do you take in government and current events?” (*No interest at all; Very little interest; Some interest; A lot of interest; A very great interest*).⁷ Five items ($\alpha = .72$) measure trust in government: “Do you think some of the

⁶ Similar to the concern for others items, the civic orientation items were face-valid and often behavioral; thus we did not validate all of the items. We validated the item on thinking about social problems against the Aspirations Index. It was positively correlated with community feeling ($r = .25, p < .01$) and negatively correlated with extrinsic values ($r = -.20, p < .01$), though not significantly correlated with intrinsic values overall ($r = .14, ns$).

⁷ Thinking about social problems and interest in government were asked across multiple forms in various years. We used only the data from the lowest-numbered form for ease of analysis (For interest in government, Form 2; for thinking about social problems, Form 3).

people running the government are crooked or dishonest?" (choices are *Most of them are crooked or dishonest; quite a few are; some are; hardly any are; none at all are crooked or dishonest*); "Do you think the government wastes much of the money we pay in taxes?" (*Nearly all tax money is wasted; A lot of tax money is wasted; Some tax money is wasted; A little tax money is wasted; No tax money is wasted*); "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" (reverse; *Almost always, often, sometimes, seldom, never*); "Do you feel that the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing?" (reverse: *They almost always know what they are doing; They usually know what they are doing; The sometimes know what they are doing; They seldom know what they are doing; They never know what they are doing.*); and "Would you say the government is pretty much run for a few big interests looking out for themselves, or is it run for the benefit of all the people?" (*Nearly always run for a few big interests; usually run for a few big interests; Run some for the big interests, some for the people; usually run for the benefit of all the people; nearly always run for the benefit of all the people.*)

Six items measure political participation ($\alpha = .71$): "Have you ever done, or do you plan to do, the following things? Vote in a public election (*I probably won't do this; don't know; I probably will do this; I have already done this*); Write to public officials; Give money to a political candidate or cause; Work in a political campaign; Participate in a lawful demonstration; Boycott certain products or stores." Data on these items are not available for 1990.

Five items inquire about taking action to improve the environment. Four use the same scale ($\alpha = .53$): "People will have to change their buying habits and way of life to correct our environmental problems"; "Government should take action to solve our environmental problems even if it means that some of the products we now use would have to be changed or banned"; "Government should place higher taxes on products which cause pollution in their manufacture or disposal, so that companies will be encouraged to find better ways to produce them"; and "I wish that government would ban throwaway bottles and cans." These have the choices *Disagree, Mostly disagree, Neither, Mostly agree, and Agree*. The last item is "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?" with the choices *None, A little, Some, and Quite a bit*.

Three items ask about making an effort to conserve energy ($\alpha = .60$): "Do you make an effort to cut down on driving, in order to save gasoline?" "Do you make an effort to cut down on the amount of electricity you use, in order to save energy?" and "In the house or apartment where you live, is an effort made to reduce heat during the winter, in order to save energy?" with the choices *Not at all, Not very much, Yes, to some extent, and Yes, quite a bit*.

The AF survey also asks some questions about civic engagement. These include the importance of keeping up to date with political affairs and becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment (also included in Study 1) and three items under the heading "For the activities below, indicate which ones you did during the past year:" "discussed politics," "voted in a student election," and "worked in a local, state, or national political campaign."⁸ The report includes the percentage who engaged in the activity *frequently*, for the first two items and *frequently* or *occasionally* for the last item on working on a political campaign. Note

that this last item was asked in only some years, and how many were presidential election years varied by generation, so these results should be interpreted with caution. (The question was asked in 1971, 1978, and 1979 for Boomers, all nonpresidential years. It was asked in 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1995, 1996, and 1997 for GenX, and in 2004, 2005, 2007, and 2008 for Millennials, about half presidential years.)

Results

All of the items measuring civic engagement and social capital were lower among Millennials than among Boomers at the same age, and all but two were lower among Millennials than GenX'ers (see Table 5 and Figure 4). Civic engagement declined an average of $d = -.34$ between Boomers and Millennials, with $d = -.11$ of the decline occurring between GenX'ers and Millennials. Excluding the outlier item about voting in a student election, the decline was $d = -.28$, with the rate of decline almost equal between Boomers and GenX and GenX and Millennials.

In contrast to the results for life goals and concern for others, several items on civic orientation declined faster or just as fast between GenX and the Millennials than between the Boomers and GenX. Millennials reported thinking about social problems less, having less interest in government, making less effort to conserve energy, and being less interested in taking "green" actions to protect the environment, either personally or through government. Millennials were also less likely than Boomers and GenX to participate in the political process through voting, writing to a public official, participating in demonstrations or boycotts, or giving money to a political cause.

The decline in wanting to take action to help the environment was particularly steep. Three times as many Millennials (15%) than Boomers (5%) said they made no personal effort at all to help the environment, and only 40% as many Millennials (9%) as Boomers (15%) said they made quite a bit of effort. Sixty-eight percent of Boomers and 60% of GenX'ers said they made an effort to cut down on electricity use to save energy, compared to 51% of Millennials. Similarly, 78% of Boomers and 71% of GenX'ers said they made an effort to reduce heat usage during the winter save energy, compared to 56% of Millennials. AF respondents also showed a generational decline in the life goal of "becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment."

In a few cases, Millennials reversed the downward trend begun by GenX (e.g., discussed politics), although Millennials' responses did not return to Boomer levels of civic engagement. In regression equations, the linear effect was stronger than the quadratic effect for all variables except for discussing politics and working in a political campaign, both in AF. However, the item on working in a political campaign was only asked in some years in AF, whereas an item about planning to work or working in a political campaign was asked in every year in MtF (in the 4-item index of political participation). The MtF item shows a linear decline over the generations, with more Boomers ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.92$) reporting interest in or participation in political campaigns compared to

⁸ AF included an item on demonstrations, but the wording changed over time (from "participated in organized demonstrations" to "participated in political demonstrations"), so we excluded this item.

Table 5
Civic Orientation and Social Capital Among American Young People, 1966–2009

| Study and goal | Boomers (1966 or 76–78) | GenX (1979–1999) | Millennials (2000–2009) | <i>d</i> Boom vs. GenX | <i>d</i> GenX vs. Millennials | <i>d</i> Boom vs. Millennials | <i>r</i> with year |
|---|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| MtF (high school seniors) | | | | | | | |
| 1. Think about social problems | 3.21 (0.81) | 3.19 (0.84) | 3.07 (0.87) | -.02 | -.14 | -.16 | -.07 |
| 2. Trust in others (index) | 1.94 (0.62) | 1.81 (0.61) | 1.76 (0.57) | -.21 | -.08 | -.29 | -.12 |
| 3. Interest in government | 3.09 (0.93) | 3.11 (0.97) | 2.98 (1.03) | .02 | -.13 | -.15 | -.05 |
| 4. Trust in government (index) | 2.96 (0.56) | 2.89 (0.58) | 2.84 (0.61) | -.12 | -.08 | -.20 | -.12 |
| 5. Political participation (index) | 2.16 (0.53) | 2.08 (0.52) | 2.01 (0.54) | -.15 | -.13 | -.28 | -.12 |
| 6. Government and individual actions to help the environment (index) | 3.76 (0.83) | 3.53 (0.83) | 3.25 (0.85) | -.28 | -.33 | -.61 | -.22 |
| 7. Personal action to help environment | 2.80 (0.75) | 2.66 (0.80) | 2.44 (0.84) | -.18 | -.27 | -.45 | -.16 |
| 8. Make effort to save energy (index) | 2.77 (0.62) | 2.61 (0.67) | 2.45 (0.69) | -.24 | -.24 | -.48 | -.18 |
| AF (first-year college students) | | | | | | | |
| 1. Important to keep up to date with political affairs | 49.5% | 38.6% | 34.6% | -.22 | -.08 | -.30 | -.81*** |
| 2. Discussed politics | 29.8% | 20.1% | 26.0% | -.23 | .14 | -.09 | -.12 |
| 3. Voted in a student election | 73.1% | 27.6% | 22.3% | -1.01 | -.12 | -1.14 | -.97*** |
| 4. Worked on political campaign | 12.8% | 9.4% | 10.8% | -.11 | .05 | -.06 | -.12 |
| 5. Important to become involved in programs to clean up the environment | 32.8% | 24.0% | 20.9% | -.20 | -.07 | -.27 | -.50** |
| Mean <i>d</i> | | | | -.23 | -.11 | -.34 | |
| Mean <i>d</i> without student election | | | | -.16 | -.11 | -.28 | |

Note. For Monitoring the Future (MtF), all *ds* .02 or over are significant at $p < .01$; all *ds* over .03 are significant at $p < .001$. For American Freshman (AF), all *ds* .01 or over are statistically significant at $p < .001$. For the AF items, *rs* are at the group level and are weighted by sample size. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

GenX ($M = 1.68, SD = 0.84$) or Millennials ($M = 1.56, SD = 0.79$; d Boomers vs. Millennials = $-.32$; d GenX vs. Millennials = $-.14$.) Among Boomers, 8% said they had already worked in a political campaign, compared to 5% of GenX and 4% of Millennials. Similarly, the number who said they did not expect to work for a campaign increased: 44% of Boomers, compared to 50% of GenX and 58% of Millennials. Thus the better evidence—the MtF survey asked of a broader population in more years—suggests that fewer Millennials than GenX’ers worked in a political campaign or anticipated doing so in the future.

In sum, these results primarily support the “Generation Me” view, with linear downward trends in civic engagement and com-

munity feeling. The “Generation We” view, which predicted that Millennials would be more civically oriented, environmentally concerned, and politically engaged, is not supported (with the possible exception of the item on discussing politics). With the average *d* for the generational differences at $-.34$, the generational similarities model is not supported for civic orientation. Cohen’s (1988) guidelines label a *d* of .30 as a medium effect.

General Discussion

In two large, nationally representative samples of American young people 1966–2009 ($N = 9.2$ million), younger generations

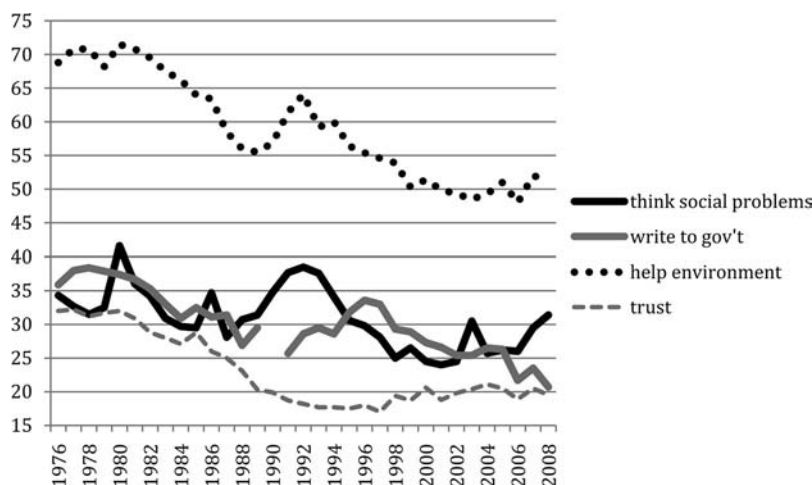


Figure 4. Civic orientation and social capital, American high school students, 1976–2008.

generally embraced community feeling less strongly. Compared to Boomers, Millennials and GenX'ers viewed goals concerned with money, fame, and image as more important, and goals concerned with self-acceptance, affiliation, and community as less important. Concern for others declined a small amount over the generations, and civic orientation declined by more than a third of a standard deviation, with Millennials continuing declines begun by GenX. Millennials were less willing to participate in collective or personal change even in areas reported to be of special interest to them, such as the environment. These results are consistent with a recent large-scale study concluding that only about 4% of modern young people are genuinely civically and politically engaged (Smith et al., 2011, p. 208).

The findings, however, are nuanced. Overall, these results primarily support the "Generation Me" view and are consistent with previous research finding increases in individualistic traits and declines in civic engagement over time (e.g., Malahy et al., 2009; McPherson et al., 2006; Putnam, 2000; Smith et al., 2011; Twenge & Foster, 2010). However, the "Generation We" model receives some support, especially in the increasing rate of volunteering reported by younger generations. The generational similarities model is correct that not all items demonstrate considerable differences, though many exceeded Cohen's (1988) revised cutoff for a small effect ($d = .10$) and several exceeded or approached his $d = .50$ cutoff for a large effect (including all three of the items on helping the environment).

The largest exception to the trend away from less community feeling was in community service and volunteering, which increased $d = .20$ in MtF and $d = .22$ in AF between GenX and the Millennials. Why would only these items increase, when other items measuring concern for others and civic orientation decreased or stayed the same? High schools increasingly required community service for graduation over this time period (Planty et al., 2006). The number of public high schools with organized community service programs jumped from 9% in 1984 to 46% in 1999 (Newmann & Rutter, 1985; Skinner & Chapman, 1999). In addition, many high school students participate in community service work to improve their college applications; thus, part of the generational increase could also be due to increasing competition in college admissions (Planty et al., 2006). As MtF asks students about their college plans, we were able to address this possibility with data. In the most recent data (2006–2008), those who planned to attend a 4-year college were significantly more likely to perform community service: $t(7360) = 16.70$, $p < .001$, $d = .39$. Nearly twice as many of those who planned to attend a 4-year college (vs. those who did not) did volunteer work once a month or more (40% vs. 24%).

Among the life goals items, some of the largest declines appeared in "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" and "finding meaning and purpose in my life." Although the first of these was correlated with the intrinsic value of self-acceptance, these items are not clearly linked to community feeling. Instead they seem to capture an element of self-introspection and abstraction that was more characteristic of the Boomers than of the two generations that followed. Future research should further explore generational differences in this area.

These findings may provide a partial explanation for the generational increase in anxiety, depressive symptoms, and poor mental

health found in other studies (e.g., Twenge et al., 2010). Kasser and Ryan (1996) found that an emphasis on extrinsic values over intrinsic values was correlated with distress and decreased psychological well-being. With young people less focused on intrinsic values such as community feeling and more focused on extrinsic values such as money, mental health issues may follow. Kasser and Ryan speculated that this may occur because extrinsic values are contingent on outside forces that may be uncontrollable, whereas intrinsic values are more under the control of the self. For example, being very well off financially may be difficult to attain, but becoming involved in community affairs often requires little more than initiative. In addition, community feeling satisfies inherent human needs for connection and meaning, whereas money may not.

Specific Alternative Explanations

Some items, such as "being very well off financially," may have increased due to economic pressures, such as the increased cost of housing and repayment of college loans (Kamenetz, 2006). However, the item wording argues against this explanation, as it uses the phrase "very well off" rather than "comfortable" or merely "well off."

Perhaps some of the intrinsic life goals items reflected concerns unique to Boomers, as the items were written when the studies began in the 1960s and 1970s when the respondents were Boomers. As we used a 2010 undergraduate sample to determine which items were intrinsic and which extrinsic, this possibility is less likely. Although an item such as "helping to promote racial understanding" may reflect issues important to Boomers in the 1960s, the 2010 students who rated this as important were also more likely to value community feeling on the well-validated and more recently developed Aspiration Index. Nevertheless, it is possible that the meaning of some of the items might have changed over the generations.

Some commentators (e.g., Arnett, 2010) have hypothesized that Millennials are more empathic and community oriented in part because they are less prejudiced toward others based on social identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. However, decreased prejudice is usually positively correlated with individualism, so that observation complements rather than opposes the "Generation Me" view. Furthermore, the relationship between individualism and prejudice is complex: although prejudice based on race and gender is usually lower in individualistic systems, prejudice based on ostensibly controllable attributes such as obesity is often heightened (e.g., Crandall et al., 2001; Kluegel, 1990). Indeed, prejudice against the overweight is increasing (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008). This is also consistent with Millennials' stronger belief in a just world (Malahy et al., 2009).

Perhaps Millennials are doers, not talkers, and thus survey questions about their opinions may not capture their true essence as a generation. This viewpoint places more importance on behaviors rather than values. However, this approach leads to similar conclusions. The items that ask about behaviors—taking action to help the environment, donating to charities, voting in student elections, contacting public officials—show declines very similar to the attitude items, and in many cases larger declines. The only

civic behavior that increased was volunteering and community service. The only other civic item in which Millennials consistently outscored GenX was discussing politics—clearly talking rather than doing.

Potentially Contradictory Data From Other Sources

For the most part, the data here suggest that Millennials are less politically engaged than Boomers and GenX were at the same age. On the other hand, Millennial voter turnout in 2004 and 2008 surpassed GenX youth voter turnout in 1996 and 2000 (though not the high GenX turnout of 1992). In 2008, the gap in voter turnout between younger and older voters was the smallest since 1972, with 51% of 18- to 29-year-olds voting vs. 67% of those over 30 (Pew Research Center, 2010). Voters 18–20, the age group with the most overlap with the respondents here, show a recent upward trend as well (39% voted in 1992, 31% in 1996, 28% in 2000, 41% in 2004, and 41% again in 2008). However, the Pew report notes that youth voter turnout in 2009 and 2010 was very low, both in absolute terms and relative to older voters. Overall, Millennials have made some progress toward reversing GenX's often low rate of voter participation. The data here, however, suggest that the overall pattern for political participation is mixed, with progress in voter participation but not in self-reported interest in government, interest in social problems, trust in government, or political participation beyond voting.

Crime rates among youth are lower for Millennials than they were for GenX at the same age (e.g., Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2003), and some have argued that this indicates a greater concern for others and empathy among this generation (e.g., Howe & Strauss, 2000). Violent crime in the United States more than doubled between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s, continued upward until a peak in the early 1990s, and by the late 2000s decreased back to the levels of the early 1970s—about 35% lower than the 1990s rates but still twice as high as the 1950s rates (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010). The challenge is that crime rates are determined by many factors other than a generation's 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 (Donohue & Levitt, 2001). Given the multiple determinants of crime, it is very difficult to ascertain if trends in crime rates are connected to the attitudes of different generations.

Strengths and Limitations

Both MtF and AF surveyed a very large number of respondents and were designed to be nationally representative of the populations they sampled (high school seniors and first-year college students at 4-year colleges or universities). This is a notable strength, as most research samples in psychology are not nationally representative. However, these samples are not necessarily representative of the entire population of 17- to 19-year-olds in the United States. Some students drop out of high school before the spring of their senior year when the MtF is administered. The AF survey samples an even more selective group—those who enroll in a 4-year college or university. These limitations to generalizability should be recognized in interpreting the findings.

In particular, it would be a concern if the samples changed over time in a systematic way. The AF dataset reflects the changing nature of college samples, with more women and minorities (primarily Latinos and Asian Americans) over time. However, these demographic shifts would suppress rather than exaggerate any increase in extrinsic values or decrease in intrinsic values, as women, Latino/as, and Asian Americans typically endorse fewer extrinsic values, more intrinsic values, lower self-esteem, and lower narcissism compared to men and Whites (e.g., Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Twenge & Crocker, 2002; Twenge & Foster, 2010). Changes in social class would also suppress these trends. The median income of college students' parents (adjusted for inflation) has increased slightly over time (Pryor et al., 2007), making it unlikely that these differences are caused by a less elite population striving to meet more extrinsic goals. Most conclusively, the MtF sample, which surveys high school students, avoids any issues with college selection yet shows similar trends.

Although the trends were similar in the MtF and AF surveys, there were also important differences, especially in the life goals items. The MtF sample of high school students showed a more consistent decline in intrinsic values and increase in extrinsic values than the AF college sample and also showed stronger trends between GenX and Millennials. These differences could be due to a number of factors. First, the demographic shifts in college samples mentioned above may have suppressed generational differences in the AF sample, making the differences appear smaller than they actually are. The MtF samples, which have undergone less pronounced demographic shifts, may provide a better view of the changes. Second, MtF and AF include different life goals items, which could cause differences in trends. Consider the MtF item "having a good marriage and family life" (which declined in importance) versus the AF item "raising a family" (which increased in importance). The difference could be due to more women, Latinos, and Asian Americans in the college sample over time compared to smaller demographic shifts in the high school samples. Alternatively, the wording of the question could be the cause, suggesting that raising children is more important to Millennials than having a good marriage. Overall, however, the general trend toward more extrinsic values and less intrinsic values appears in both datasets.

As with most surveys, MtF and AF rely on self-reports, which are subject to bias. Correcting for relative centrality as we did for the MtF data in Study 1 nullifies one such bias, but there could be others. On the other hand, relying on self-reports could be considered a strength in generations research, as they capture what a generation's members say about themselves rather than how they are perceived by older people.

The time-lag design of these studies is a notable strength, as age is held constant while time and generation vary. Thus the differences in life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation cannot be due to age. However, a time-lag design cannot separate the effects of generation and time period. Thus it is possible that the differences found here reflect the attitudes of the time period and will not (or did not) persist as young people grew older. For example, perhaps older Americans (such as the G.I. and Silent generations) also became less civically oriented between the 1960s and the 2000s. Most sociological research suggests that genera-

tional effects are larger than time period effects, however (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Schaie, 1965).

As with any study examining group differences, it is important to note that the generational differences found here are averages. Similar to most cultural, racial, political, and gender differences, there is more variation within groups than between groups. At the same time, even small average differences can cause large changes at the ends of the distribution. For example, political participation declined $d = -.28$ between the Boomers and the Millennials. Cohen's (1988) cutoffs label this a medium-sized effect. However, the ends of the distribution show large differences: Only 19% of Boomers said they "probably won't" write to a public official, compared with 23% of GenX'ers and 32% of Millennials. Thus there was a 68% increase in the number of young people who believe they are unlikely to contact public officials, which could certainly be considered meaningful. Similarly, the importance of "having lots of money" increased only $d = .13$ from Boomers to Millennials, yet there was a 63% increase in the number of young people who rated money as "extremely important" (16% of Boomers compared to 26% of Millennials). Even with moderate average changes, the large increases in the number of highly extrinsically oriented and politically disengaged young people could have a meaningful impact on society. Larger effects may be even more meaningful; for example, the three times as many Millennials (vs. Boomers) who say they do nothing to help the environment or save energy could have large effects on conservation initiatives.

These comparisons are also relative. Although the importance of "finding meaning and purpose in my life" decreased and "having lots of money" increased over the generations, Millennials still rate finding meaning and purpose as more important than having lots of money. Similarly, these results do not suggest that Millennials and GenX'ers are not concerned for others or that they lack civic orientation, but instead that there are generational declines on these attributes.

Another limitation is that these databases go back only to 1966, when the Boomers were beginning to enter college, and so do not provide a view of levels of community feeling among the Silent and G.I. generations born before the Boomers. Perhaps the Boomers were extraordinarily high in community feeling compared to the generations before them as well as those after them. However, data from other sources suggest this is not the case. Surveys of American adults in the 1950s and early 1960s, which sampled the Silent and G.I. generations, found higher levels of trust in government, trust in others, and community feeling than surveys conducted in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Fukuyama, 1999). Other studies have found that the Silent and G.I. generations had lower levels of individualistic traits (e.g., André et al., 2010; Twenge, 2001), higher levels of need for social approval (Twenge & Im, 2007), and lower levels of antisocial attitudes (Twenge et al., 2010) than Boomers. This previous research suggests that the decline in community feeling may be a linear trend that began before, or with, the Boomers. However, it is possible that Boomers are relatively unique in their interest in intrinsic values such as seeking meaning in life and developing a meaningful philosophy of life; these introspective values were at fairly low levels in the 1950s but surged in the late 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Yankelovich, 1981).

Conclusions

There is considerable intellectual, cultural, and economic interest in discovering and predicting generational trends. Across two large surveys conducted over time, more recent generations evidence lower levels of community feeling as seen in less intrinsic and more extrinsic life goals, less concern for others, and lower civic engagement.

More challenging, of course, is to try to predict the future from these data. Will the next generation—those born after 2000 and sometimes labeled "Gen Z" or "Homelanders"—continue these trends or reverse them? For example, how will the 2007–2009 recession affect children? Under one view, this generation will be conformist and frugal, similar to those who were children during the Great Depression, and will return to more intrinsic values (e.g., Elder, 1998; Greenfield, 2009). By another view, the extrinsic focus could continue as long as other cultural forces remain consistent in their messages (e.g., education, media). This view is supported by research finding that economic instability leads to heightened materialism (for a review, see Kasser, 2002).

The data analyzed here suggest that the popular view of Millennials as more caring, community oriented, and politically engaged than previous generations (Arnett, 2010; Greenberg & Weber, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Winograd & Hais, 2008, 2011) is largely incorrect. However, the rate of volunteering—an important community behavior—has increased in today's young people, though likely due to outside forces. Saving the environment, an area purported to be of particular concern to young Millennials, instead showed one of the largest declines. How these attitudes and behaviors will shape the young generation and the country as more Millennials enter adult life remains to be seen.

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