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

By Jean M. Twenge
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Add one more to the growing list of names given to the current generation of college students. Whether they're called Millennials, Gen Ys, Gen Next, the Net Generation, or Echo Boomers, what most agree on is that this cohort of students is different from any other. In *Generation Me*, Jean Twenge argues that Generation Me (GenMe) is not just another title assigned to previous student characteristics; rather, she concludes that many commonly held beliefs and accepted hypotheses about this generation are incorrect. Howe and Strauss's Millennial Generation (2000), and the subsequent seven characteristics afforded to the Millennials (2003), is a central target for Twenge's opinions. She argues that Howe and Strauss are wrong and their conclusion and generational traits are in opposition to the psychological indicators.

Twenge bases her conclusions on primarily qualitative and quantitative data combined with a meta-analysis of five decades of data collected from 1.3 million young Americans. These data originated from mainstream, valid, and reliable psychological tests administered to thousands of diverse populations. *Generation Me* is an amalgamation of Twenge's twelve studies published in peer reviewed psychology journals and her poignant, and often humorous, observations about American culture. As a self-identified member of GenMe, Twenge's perspective as both a scholar and pop culture critic is an interesting and insightful combination.

The opening chapter, "You Don't Need Their Approval: The Decline of Social Rules," presents Twenge's core argument. She holds that members of GenMe focus solely on themselves; "We are driven by our individual needs and desires" (p. 19). Both popular culture and higher education bear witness to this previously unknown rise of the individual as holding ultimate attention. In a sub-section entitled, "Call me Beth," Twenge discusses the rise of the entitled student, the removal of the faculty member as an authority figure, and the creation of the informal and facilitated learning process. She argues that the current state of student behavior in the classroom and on college campuses is a direct outgrowth of students' belief that their opinions—regardless of merit—are valid,

meaningful, and equal to those of faculty and administrators. Moreover, disagreements on grammar, punctuation, safety guidelines, and basic information rest solely on faculty and staff opinions and not on accepted rules, logic, or facts. GenMe feels that because individuality rules everyday life, it also should rein inside the classroom. This generation is not afraid to state this bluntly and—more often then previous generations—crudely to anyone.

The rise of a self-esteem obsessed educational system and society represents the second element in Twenge's presentation of GenMe characteristics. In "The Army of One," the author roundly condemns self-esteem focused education as counterproductive, fostering narcissism, and lacking in empirical support for academic or personal enhancement. Her keen focus on the comprehensive integration of esteem-based academic and social activities inside and outside the classroom illuminates the extremes to which students require support without corresponding challenge. Twenge argues that GenMe students expect good grades and high praise, and their egos feel assaulted when either is missing. She contends that the outcomes of these programs are the well-documented inflation of academic grades and the increased number of awards for participation regardless of performance.

GenMe students firmly believe that they can be whatever they want regardless of experience, education, perseverance, or ability. In the third chapter, "You Can Be Anything You Want to Be," Twenge does not dismantle the American Dream so much as point out that GenMe believes in it unrealistically. The author does indicate that many achieve success in personal and professional areas; however, she offers a wide range of research that indicates members of GenMe do not comprehend the means or methods to achieve such goals. By presenting the developing child (GenMe student) with limitless opportunities, some students cease to see the reality of their situation. GenMe does not believe that everyone will be rich or famous, but each is convinced that they will be among those who are.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 address a variety of GenMe's mental, personal, financial, and societal problems. Twenge presents anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress, disenfranchisement, disengagement, sexuality, and crude behavior as an entanglement of the three aforementioned GenMe characteristics in differing proportions. She writes, "Our growing tendency to put the self first leads to unparalleled freedom, but it also creates an enormous amount of pressure on us to stand alone" (p. 109). It is the focus on the individual that creates a sense of isolation from the community and the support of others, while offering the freedom to behave in any manner desired. The self-sufficient focus removes GenMe's need for functional social systems and rules, thus reducing the importance and relevance of long-term relationships, political involvement, and altruistic engagement in the community. By putting oneself outside of the community and acting wholly independent of others' opinions, there is no sense of responsibility to society and others.

According to Twenge, GenMe is cynical because negative events seem random and out of their control. Twenge highlights studies that indicate GenMe feels external entities are responsible for their fate and that they have little control over

their future. Twenge argues that the distancing of the self from personal responsibility is a means of coping. Since there is no such thing as personal failure to GenMe, others are responsible for poor performance, lack of success, or misfortune; thus, the individuals are able to fend off challenges to their identity. If it is "not my fault," then there is no personal responsibility, no necessary change in behavior, and the GenMe mindset can continue without question.

In the final two chapters, Twenge turns from an almost uniform pessimism about GenMe to emphasis on success and opportunity for this generation, saying that "this is the good news portion of the book" (p. 181). The author states that with the removal of adherence to social norms, GenMe has accepted diversity at an unprecedented pace. In Chapter 7, "The Equality Revolution," Twenge utilizes her theme of inflated self-esteem and self-importance to highlight the removal of many previously held social stigmas related to race, gender, religion, and sexual identity. Since GenMe has limited connections to social norms, there is little to perpetuate previously held negative beliefs pertaining to women, ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians, which have seen considerable progress in recent years.

In the final chapter, "Applying Our Knowledge," Twenge diverges from a reliance on her own research to employ the findings of others. The author provides recommendations to a number of generation influencing entities, and she champions low-cost, reasoned, and academically sound modifications to systems that evolved into their current state without review. Groups of specific interest to Twenge include K–12 and higher education, current and future employers, parents, the U.S. social services sector, and entrepreneurs. Alterations range from the general (provide better career counseling) to the specific (move the start time of K–12 education to 9 a.m.). All are consistent with her previous conclusions and she argues, each would benefit not only GenMe but also all other generations.

In *Generation Me*, Jean Twenge provides the reader with a unique, well-researched perspective on the characteristics of the current generation of students. By using longitudinal meta-analyses and her own primary research studies, she concludes that GenMe is self-centered, has a high level of self-esteem, and is excessively optimistic. Twenge argues that these characteristics are unique to this generation; furthermore, she argues that GenMe suffers from a greater number of mental, personal, social, communal, educational, and relationship problems than any other generation in American history. Her findings directly contradict many of the commonly accepted characteristics and traits of the Millennial Generation.

Generation Me has appeal for a wide audience. For administrators, faculty, and graduate students interested in furthering their understanding of those they serve, and alongside whom they may work, this book may provide some interesting insights. Providers of student services may gain information and ideas on how better to advise and motivate their students. Individuals who do not agree with the standard Millennial characterization may find *Generation Me* useful in validating their observations, solidifying their opinions, or reinforcing their motivation to help this generation succeed. Others will find it an interesting and entertaining presentation of character traits for those students we see every day.

Finally, Twenge provides a unique and unflinching perspective of this generation, about which further discussion and debate can focus.

References

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