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Changes Over Time in Compassion-Related Variables in the United States

Abstract and Keywords

Compassion, or empathic concern, is an emotional response to another's suffering, coupled with the desire to take action to alleviate that suffering. Throughout history, older generations have been critical of younger generations, often arguing that they are more self-focused than previous generations. However, it is important to examine actual data with respect to changes over time in such variables. Without doing so, we risk spreading potentially harmful and inaccurate stereotypes about young Americans. The goal of this chapter is to review research examining changes over time in compassion-related variables in the United States. Research suggests that compassion-related variables have indeed been declining over time, while self-focused variables have been increasing. However, we will also discuss counter-arguments and counter-evidence, and present possible implications of this research.

Keywords: compassion, empathic concern, temporal changes, social change, other-focus, self-focus

Overview

Young adults in the United States today have a bad reputation. A glance of the headlines in the early 2010s finds news articles accusing so-called millennials of being coddled (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), whiny (Proud, 2015), and lazy, entitled narcissists (Stein, 2013). However, in light of the perennial human tendency for older people to be critical of the younger generation (Eibach & Libby, 2009), it is important to examine actual data with respect to changes over time in such variables. Without doing so, we risk spreading potentially harmful and inaccurate stereotypes about young Americans.

In this chapter, we will review research examining changes over time in compassion-related variables in the United States. Are there historical trends of decreasing compassion and increasing self-focus in the United States? The results of our comprehensive review indeed suggest that compassion-related variables have been declining over time, while self-focused variables have been increasing. Parallel changes in technology and media, among other potential explanations, may help us better understand the broader cultural context in which these changes were occurring. We will also review possible implications of this research, and discuss counter-arguments and counter-evidence. We conclude with some suggestions for future directions.

What Is Compassion?

The study of compassion and compassion-related concepts is wrought with definitional issues. The terms *compassion, empathy,* and *sympathy* are often used interchangeably. Although they are closely related concepts, each term represents a distinct construct. *Compassion* is an awareness that another person is in pain or suffering, coupled with wanting to do something to alleviate that suffering (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). *Empathy*, on the other hand, is often defined as both an emotional and a cognitive construct. *Empathic concern*, the emotional component, refers to other-oriented feelings of care and concern for the suffering of others. To make things more confusing, empathic concern (p. 332) is sometimes referred to as *sympathy* (Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987), but *sympathy* is also sometimes used to refer to feelings of pity (Gerdes, 2011). Feelings of empathic concern often motivate the desire to do something to alleviate others' suffering (Batson, 2011). Given this, there is much overlap between the construct of empathic concern and compassion in that they are both emotional responses to others' suffering that motivate altruistic prosocial action. *Perspective-taking*, or cognitive empathy, involves imagining other people's points of view (Davis, 1983). In itself, perspective-taking need not be prosocial. Indeed, it is possible for people to use perspective-taking skills to manipulate others and get what they want from them (Epley, Caruso, & Bazerman, 2006). Many scholars see compassion (or empathic concern) to be one of two possible reactions to seeing someone in distress or need; the other response is the more self-focused response of *personal distress*, which is sometimes confusingly called *empathic distress* (Davis, 1983; Singer & Klimecki, 2014).

In this chapter, we will review changes over time in compassion-related traits, such as those mentioned, but also compassion-related behaviors. *Prosocial behavior* is any action intended to benefit another person (Batson & Powell, 2003). Prosocial behaviors can be motivated by *altruism*, which is the desire to benefit others, but they can also be motivated by *egoism*, which is the desire to benefit oneself (Batson & Powell, 2003). Both cognitive and emotional empathy are associated with more prosocial behaviors (Batson, 2011; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Underwood & Moore, 1982).

Different Meanings of Different Methods

Before reviewing the changes over time in compassion-related variables, we will explain the different methodologies used in this literature. This is important to understand in order to make appropriate conclusions about the findings. We organized our chapter according to the strength of the potential evidence about generational changes (also called *cohort effects*), ranging from weaker (cross-sectional) to stronger (repeated surveys with age held constant, or cross-temporal meta-analyses).

Single time-Point cross-Sectional surveys

The weakest evidence for cohort effects comes from cross-sectional surveys, which rely on correlational data in which people of different age groups are asked questions or take standardized tests at a single time point. These results are often erroneously discussed in terms of generational or birth cohort effects. This can be misleading, because with this type of data, taken from a single time point, it is impossible to determine if any results are due to natural developmental changes that occur as people age (*development effects*) or because of generational changes that affect the mindset of a group of individuals (*cohort effects*), or both combined. Birth cohorts (or generations) are defined as people born within a specified range of years who experienced similar significant events and social norms based on the time period in which they were raised (Stewart & Healy, 1989; Twenge, 2000). Four commonly used generations are: the *Silent Generation* (born 1925–1945), *Baby Boomers* (born 1946–1964), *Generation X* (born 1965–1979), and *Millennials* (born 1980–2000; Howe & Strauss, 2009). Yet there is debate over whether the use of arbitrary generational cutoffs makes sense (Twenge, 2014). Overall, results from single time-point cross-sectional surveys must be interpreted with caution.

Trends in cultural products

Cultural products include books, songs, political speeches, greeting cards, art, and other such artifacts (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). These do not represent direct measures of traits or attitudes of individuals, but instead assess more indirect societal trends related to compassion. One strength of using cultural products is that they are often available even before certain standardized measures. For example, Google Ngram makes it possible to search millions of digitized books from 1800 onward (Michel et al., 2011), enabling us to examine the frequency of word usage across this relatively long time period.

Cross-Temporal meta-analyses

The method of cross-temporal meta-analyses involves collecting data on traits or other standardized measures from published or unpublished sources, and then examining changes over time in these measures. Since the cross-temporal meta-analysis method holds age constant, it can determine changes over time across different cohorts. For example, it can compare dispositional empathy scores of 20-year-old college students in the 1980s to empathy scores of 20-year-old college students from the 1990s and 2000s. However clever this method, these studies are often limited by the samples they use; nearly all of them rely on college student samples, since these are the participants most widely used by psychology researchers. Therefore, the results of these studies cannot be generalized to (p. 333) less affluent and more diverse groups in the United States. Another problem with this method is that it relies on standardized scales, and thus can only go back as far as the point at which they were developed. Often this only reveals window of psychological change in a relatively brief period (e.g., the 1970s to the present day), rather than a longer time period.

Multi-Year surveys

There are some large, nationally representative datasets that have asked questions related to compassion on a regular (annual or biannual) basis for many years. These surveys either sample the entire U.S. population (e.g., the *General Social Survey*), or they sample a specific age group (e.g., high school students in the *Monitoring the Future Study*). In any case, examining temporal changes in these surveys is a legitimate way of understanding societal-level psychological changes on variables of interest. One strength of these surveys is that since they draw on nationally representative samples, the results can be generalized to the United States as a whole rather than a certain subset of the population.

Changes Over Time in Other-Focused Variables

We first discuss changes over time in *other-focused* personality traits, attitudes, behaviors, and cultural indicators.

Other-Focused Traits

Single time-Point cross-Sectional surveys

In a 2015 survey conducted by NBC News, 62% of 2,650 American adults said that they believe that kids today are less kind than kids in the past (Raymond, 2015). However, very little can be determined from a single survey taken at a single time point. For example, we cannot tell if a similar percentage of adults in the 1990s and 1970s would have expressed the same sentiment. Indeed, throughout most of human history, older people have had concerns about the moral character of the youth. As a case in point, in 700 BCE, Hesiod, a Greek poet, wrote: "Men will dishonor their parents as they grow quickly old, and will carp at them, chiding them with bitter words, hard-hearted they, not knowing the fear of the gods. They will not repay their aged parents the cost of their nurture, for might shall be their right." The sentiments expressed in this quote seem quite contemporary, yet examples such as these have occurred throughout written history (Eibach & Libby, 2009). This speaks to the importance of carefully documenting actual changes over time in a society, using empirical approaches.

Cross-Temporal meta-analyses

Given the previously defined relationship between empathy and compassion, we first examine changes in empathy over time. A cross-temporal meta-analysis that examined changes over time in American college students' dispositional empathy found declines in empathic concern (emotional empathy) and perspective-taking (cognitive empathy) scores between 1979 and 2009 (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2010). These declines were most pronounced after the year 2000.

Next, *adult attachment styles* involve how people connect with and relate to others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Secure feelings of attachment between the self and others provide a foundation for compassion, while insecure attachment interferes with one's ability to feel compassion (Diehl, Elnick, Bourbeau, & Labouvie-Vief, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). A cross-temporal meta-analysis of adult attachment styles found that the proportion of American college students reporting a secure attachment style declined between 1988 and 2011 (Konrath, Chopik, Hsing, & O'Brien, 2014).

Other-Focused Attitudes and Values

Multi-Year surveys

Moral reasoning is the degree to which individuals conform to moral rules because of consequences to themselves, others, and society (Kohlberg, 1976). Lower-level moral reasoning focuses on avoiding negative consequences for oneself (e.g., punishment), whereas considering consequences to other individuals is seen as more advanced moral reasoning. Yet, the highest level considers consequences to society at large. Moral reasoning is related to compassion because higher levels of moral reasoning are present in more empathic adolescents (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Hoffman, 2001). One multi-

year study found that moral reasoning levels decreased over time from 1979 to 2005 (Thoma & Bebeau, 2008).

Both the Monitoring the Future Study and the American Freshman Survey include items that tap into concern for others. Between 1966 and 2009, high school seniors and first-year college students were less likely to express empathy for out-groups, less likely to want a job that helps others (e.g., social worker), and less likely to say they would eat differently if it meant more food for the hungry (Twenge, (p. 334) Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). Such lower levels of concern for others imply difficulty with compassion towards others.

Next, *trust* involves holding positive expectations of others (Rotter, 1971). More trusting people also tend to be more empathic (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006), so changes in trust over time could be seen as signaling changes in a positive focus on others, with implications for compassionate responses toward them. Trust in others declined from 1976 to 2012 in adults (General Social Survey) and declined from 1972 to 2012 in high school seniors (Monitoring the Future Study; Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014).

Other-Focused Behaviors

Single time-Point cross-Sectional surveys

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) found that, in 2014, American millennials reported the lowest rate of volunteering (21.7%), and Generation X had the highest rate (29.4%). Baby boomers (27.2%) and older adults (24.0%) were in the middle (CNCS, 2015). However, without comparing these results across several time periods, we cannot tease apart developmental from cohort effects.

Multi-Year surveys

Charitable donations involve freely giving money to nonprofit organizations or individuals in need (Bekkers, 2005). Although motivations for charitable giving can be self-focused or other-focused, because charitable giving benefits others, we consider it an other-focused behavior. Indeed, more empathic people are more likely to engage in charitable giving (Bekkers, 2006).

Between 1966 and 2009, the Monitoring the Future Study found that high school seniors were significantly less likely to say that they would donate to charity in the future (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). However, this is not a very strong measure of charitable giving, because it is based on self-reported future expectations. Giving USA annually collects and analyzes tax data, economic indicators, and demographics from more reliable sources like the Internal Revenue Service, the Philanthropy Panel Study, and the Census Bureau (Giving USA Foundation, 2015). Between 1974 and 2014, the total dollar amount of charitable donations by individuals increased significantly, even when adjusted for inflation. However, giving has remained flat at around 2% of disposable income across this

same time period. Because of the overall increase in charitable donations, one might conclude that Americans are becoming more generous. However, they are not donating a higher proportion of their disposable income, which casts doubt on this assumption. In addition, since charitable donations do not necessarily indicate altruistic motivations, increasing total charitable donations do not necessarily imply increased compassion in the United States.

Volunteering is another formal prosocial behavior that involves freely giving time to nonprofit organizations (Wilson, 2000). Several multi-year studies have examined volunteering rates over time:

- • Between 1984 and 1997, ABC News/*Washington Post* surveys found that the percentage of Americans who volunteered in the past year increased from 44% to 58% (reported in [Ladd, 1999]).
- • Between 1977 and 1995, Gallup/Princeton polls found that the percentage of Americans reporting involvement in social service work increased from 26% to 54% (reported in [Ladd, 1999]).
- • Between 1989 and 2007, the CNCS found that the rate of volunteering increased across all age groups, with the largest increase among teens (CNCS, 2007).
- • Between 1966 and 2009, the Monitoring the Future Study and the American Freshman Survey found that high school seniors and first-year college students were more likely to have participated in volunteer work over time (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012).
- • However, between 2003 and 2013, Giving USA found that volunteering rates steadily declined over time (Giving USA Foundation, 2015).

Overall, it appears that volunteering was increasing from the middle of the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century, but it may have declined in later years. As with charitable donations, volunteering does not necessarily imply altruistic motivations. Although more empathetic people behave more prosocially, including donating to charity (Bekkers, 2006) and volunteering (Bekkers, 2005; Penner, 2002), people volunteer for many reasons (Clary & Snyder, 1999). For example, more narcissistic people often help for strategic or selfish reasons rather than for altruistic reasons (Konrath, Ho, & Zarins, 2016). Thus, a rise in volunteering rates over time does not necessarily imply increased compassion over time. Overall, we must consider (p. 335) these behavioral changes within the larger context of changes in traits, attitudes, and values.

Furthermore, a study used the lost letter paradigm to measure changes over time in helping behavior. The lost letter paradigm measures the return rate of addressed, stamped envelopes that are "lost" in public locations (Milgram, Mann, & Harter, 1965). In this study, fewer letters were returned in 2011 (49.46%) than in 2001 (58.68%) in the United States. However, this decrease in helping behavior did not occur in Canada, where return rates were similar in 2001 (53.59%) and 2011 (51.40%) (Hampton, 2016).

Beyond helping, volunteering, and charitable donations, people engage in society in a number of ways. People who are more actively engaged in society and politics (e.g., more likely to vote) score higher in empathic concern (Bekkers, 2005). The Monitoring the Future Study and the American Freshman Survey found that, between 1966 and 2009, there was a decrease in civic engagement and social capital among young Americans (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). Millennials were less likely to think about social problems, have an interest in government, vote, write to a public official, participate in a demonstration, give money to political causes, or take action to help the environment, compared to prior generations of young Americans (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). The only exception to this trend is that millennials were more likely to discuss politics over this time period compared to those from Generation X (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). Overall, this lower civic engagement could have implications for compassion toward others who are from different backgrounds.

So far, we have discussed changes in general engagement with society, but we also see changes at a more personal/relational level. More socially connected people have more friends and people to discuss important topics with (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). One multi-year study using the General Social Survey found that the number of people with whom Americans discussed important topics decreased from an average of 2.94 other people in 1985 to an average of 2.08 other people in 2004 (McPherson et al., 2006). However, across the same time period, Americans were more likely to discuss important matters with their spouse (McPherson et al., 2006). Since empathy enhances, and can also be enhanced by, social connections with others (Watt, 2005), it is likely that declines in the number of intimate others over time could have implications for people's compassion toward others.

Taken together, the trends we report in this section align with more in-depth prior scholarship documenting declines in trust in others, social connections, and political, civic, and religious participation in the second half of the twentieth century (Putnam, 2001).

Other-Focused Cultural Indicators

Cultural products can vary in their degrees of relative individualism (independence) versus collectivism (interdependence; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). The more other-focused aspect, *collectivism*, involves seeing oneself as part of an interconnected group with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As such, people who are more collectivist also tend to be more empathic (Realo & Luik, 2002). Focusing on oneself in relation to others might make it easier for individuals to be compassionate towards others.

There have been declines in interdependent/collectivist words and phrases in American *books*, from 1960 and 2008 (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012b) and from 1860 and 2006 (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015). [1] In addition, the use of the term "self-control" in American books decreased from 1900 to 2000 (Konrath & Anderson, 2011), and first-person plural pronouns (e.g., "we") became less common between 1960 and 2008 (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2013). Parallel changes have been found when examining other-focused words in *songs*. For example, one study found that the number of other-focused words, social interaction words, and positive emotion words all declined in popular songs from 1980 to 2007 (DeWall, Pond Jr., Campbell, & Twenge, 2011). Finally, another study found decreases in the use of words that indicate other-interest (e.g., mentions of friends) in U.S. presidential State of the Union *speeches* between 1790 and 2012 (Chopik, Joshi, & Konrath, 2014). [2]

Summary of Other-Focused Results

There have been changes at the individual, family, and societal levels in a number of other-focused variables. In general, there have been significant *decreases* in other-focused traits, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Cultural indicators also point to a trend toward decreased collectivism in American society (see Table 25.1 for a detailed summary). Given these decreases in empathy, secure attachment, moral reasoning, concern for others, and trust, coupled with cultural trends away from collectivist values, we can begin to piece together a clearer picture of the overall trends in compassion-related variables. Even in light of the inconsistent behavioral evidence around volunteering and charitable giving, other behavioral measures indicate a decrease in other-focused behaviors (e.g., civic engagement and social connections). Decreases in these traits, attitudes, and values are likely to make it more difficult for recent generations of American college students to be compassionate.

Table 25.1 Summary of Prior Research on Temporal Trends in Compassion-Related Variables

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Other-focused traits						

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Perceptions of kids' empathy	Respondents believe kids today have less empathy than kids in previous generations	None specified	N = 2,650 adults (nationally representative)	Single time-point cross-sectional survey	NBC News Season of Kindness Poll	(Raymond, 2015)
Dispositional empathy	Empathic concern and perspective-taking declined	1979–2009	N = 13,737 college students in 72 studies	Cross-temporal meta-analysis	Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983)	(Konrath et al., 2010)
Adult attachment style	Secure attachment declined, dismissing attachment increased	1988–2011	N = 25,243 college students in 94 studies	Cross-temporal meta-analysis	Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)	(Konrath et al., 2014)

Other-focused attitudes and values

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Moral development	Moral reasoning levels declined	1979–2006	N = 15,115 college and graduate students	Multi-year survey	Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1990)	(Thoma & Bebeau, 2008)
Attitudes toward others	Concern for others declined	1966–2009	MtF[1]: N = 463,753 high school students (nationally representative); AF[2]: N = 8.7 million college students (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future & American Freshman Survey	(Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012)
Trust in others	Trust in others declined	1972–2012	GSS[3]: N = 37,493 adults (nationally representative);	Multi-year survey	General Social Survey & Monitoring the Future	(Twenge et al., 2014)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/Survey	Citation
			MtF: N = 101,633 high school students (nationally representative)			

Other-focused behavioral indicators

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/Survey	Citation
Volunteering	American millennials reported the lowest levels of volunteering (21.7%) and Generation X had the highest rate (29.4%). Baby boomers (27.2%) and older adults (24.0%) were in the middle	2014	~100,000 adults each month (nationally representative)	Single time-point survey	Volunteer supplement of the Current Population Survey	(CNCS, 2015)
Charitable giving	Intent to donate to charity decreased	1966–2009	MtF: N = 463,753 high school students (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future	(Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012)
Charitable giving	Total charitable giving increased, but giving as a proportion of GDP and of disposable income remained around 2%	1974–2014	All US citizens who filed taxes	Multi-year survey	Giving USA	(Giving USA Foundation, 2015)
Volunteering	Rates of volunteering and expected future	1966–2009	MtF: N = 463,753 high school students (nationally	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future & American	(Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
	volunteering increased		representative); AF: N = 8.7 million college students (nationally representative)		Freshman Survey	
Volunteering	Volunteering increased	1974–2007	~100,000 adults each month (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Volunteer supplement of the Current Population Survey	(CNCS, 2007)
Volunteering	Volunteering increased	1977–1997	Number of participants not given [4]	Multi-year survey	ABC News/ Washington Post Poll (1984–1997) & Gallup and Princeton Survey Research Associates Poll (1977–1995)	(Ladd, 1999)
Volunteering	Volunteering declined	2003–2013	~100,000 adults each month (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Giving USA – Volunteer supplement of the Current Population Survey	(Giving USA Foundation, 2015)
Helping behavior	In the United States, the number of letters returned declined	2001–2011	United States: 2001: 2,161 letters 2011: 2,210 letters	Multi-year measure	Lost-letter paradigm (Milgram et al., 1965)	(Hampton, 2016)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
			Canada: 2001: 1,560 letters 2011: 1,535 letters			
Civic engagement	Civic engagement declined	1966–2009	MtF: $N =$ 463,753 high school students (nationally representative); AF: $N = 8.7$ million college students (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future & American Freshman Survey	(Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012)
Religious participation	Attendance at religious services and religious affiliation declined	1976–2013	$N = 11.2$ million high school and students (nationally representative); AF: $N = 8.7$ million college students (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future, Monitoring the Future 8th & 10th grade surveys, & American Freshman Survey	(Twenge, Exline, et al., 2015)
Social connectedness	Adults reported fewer confidants with whom they discussed important matters	1985–2004	~1,100 households per year (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	General Social Survey	(McPherson et al., 2006)

Other-focused cultural indicators

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Collectivist/ communal words	Use of communal words and phrases decreased	1860–2006 1960–2008	American fiction and nonfiction books	Cultural products	Google Ngrams	(Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2012b)
"Self-control"	Use of the word "self-control" decreased	1900–2000	English-language books	Cultural products	Google Ngrams	(Konrath & Anderson, 2011)
Pronoun use	Use of first-person plural pronouns (indicating collectivist values) decreased	1960–2008	American fiction and nonfiction books	Cultural products	Google Ngrams	(Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2013)
Song lyrics	Use of other-focused words, words related to social interactions, and positive emotion words decreased	1980–2007	Top ten US songs of each year	Cultural products	Song lyrics	(DeWall et al., 2011)
State of the Union	Use of other-person pronouns and mentions of friends decreased	1970–2012	226 State of the Union Addresses	Cultural products	State of the Union Addresses	(Chopik et al., 2014)
Self-focused traits						
Narcissism	Narcissism increased	1979–2008	N = 49,818 college students in 107 studies	Cross-temporal meta-analysis	Narcissistic Personality Index (Raskin & Hall, 1979)	(Twenge & Foster, 2010; Twenge et al., 2008)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Narcissism	Narcissism increased within a single college campus	1994–2009	$N = 4,152$ University of South Alabama introductory psychology students	Multi-year survey	Narcissistic Personality Index (Raskin & Hall, 1979)	(Twenge & Foster, 2010)
Self-esteem	Self-esteem increased in college students	1968–1994	$N = 65,965$ students in 199 samples	Cross-temporal meta-analysis	Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)	(Twenge & Campbell, 2001)
Self-esteem	Self-esteem decreased in children from 1965 to 1979 then increased from 1980 to 1993	1965–1993	$N = 39,353$ students in 156 samples	Cross-temporal meta-analysis	Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967)	(Twenge & Campbell, 2001)
Self-esteem	Self-esteem increased	1988–2008	$N = 77,522$ middle school, high school, and college students in 264 samples	Cross-temporal meta-analysis	Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)	(Gentile et al., 2010)
Ambition	Adolescents' ambition has increased	1976–2000	Ns range from 1,946 (2000) to 3,295 (1978); high school seniors from 125 high schools each year (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future	(Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Narcissism	Narcissism has increased	~1990–2008	N = 933 college students and graduate students	Multi-year survey	California Personality Index (Gough, 1956)	(Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010)
Agentic traits	Self-ratings on agentic traits increased	1966–2009	N = 6.5 million college students	Multi-year survey	American Freshman Survey	(Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2012a)

Self-focused attitudes and values

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Desired job characteristics (intrinsic vs. extrinsic rewards)	1. (1) Value of intrinsic and social rewards decreased 2. (2) Value of leisure rewards increased 3. (3) Value of extrinsic rewards increased from 1976 to 1991 then decreased slightly from 1991 to 2006, but increased overall between 1976 and 2006 4. (4) No differences in value of altruistic rewards	1976, 1991, 2006	N = 16,507 high school students	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future	(Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2010)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Life goals (intrinsic vs. extrinsic goals)	Intrinsic life goals decreased and extrinsic life goals increased	1966–2010	MtF: $N =$ 463,753 high school students (nationally representative); AF: $N = 8.7$ million college students (nationally representative); 182 undergraduate college students from San Diego State University	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future & American Freshman Survey	(Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012)

Self-focused cultural indicators

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Individualistic words	Use of individualistic words and phrases increased	1860–2006 1960–2008	American fiction and nonfiction books	Cultural products	Google Ngrams	(Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2012b)
"Self-esteem"	Use of the word "self-esteem" increased	1900–2000	English-language books	Cultural products	Google Ngrams	(Konrath & Anderson, 2011)
Pronoun use	Use of first-person singular and second-person pronouns (indicating individualistic values) increased	1960–2008	American fiction and nonfiction books	Cultural products	Google Ngrams	(Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2013)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Song lyrics	Use of self-focused words and antisocial words and phrases increased	1980–2007	Top ten US songs of each year	Cultural products	Song lyrics	(DeWall et al., 2011)
State of the Union	Use of first-person pronouns (singular and plural) and mentions of family increased	1970–2012	226 State of the Union Addresses	Cultural products	State of the Union Addresses	(Chopik et al., 2014)
Baby names	Preference for unique baby names increased	1880–2012 1880–2007	All US citizens who have a Social Security card	Historical data	Social Security Administration baby name database	(Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Twenge, Abebe, et al., 2010)
Household size	1. (1) Frequency of single-child families relative to multi-child families increased 2. (2) Frequency of single-generation households relative to multi-generation households increased 3. (3) Percentage of adults and older adults	1. (1) 1880–2012 2. (2) 1880–2012 3. (3) 1880–2012 4. (4) 1860–2012 5. (5) 1900–2009	All US citizens	Historical data	US Census & the American Community Survey; government records from the National Center for Health Statistics at the US Department of Health and Human Services	(Grossmann & Varnum, 2015)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
	living alone increased 4. (4) Average family size decreased 5. (5) Divorce rates relative to marriage rates increased					

Counterevidence

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Loneliness	Loneliness declined	1978–2009	*N* = 13,041 college students in 48 samples	Cross-temporal meta-analysis	UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996)	(Clark et al., 2014)
Loneliness	Loneliness declined	1991–2012	*N* = 385,153 high school students (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future	(Clark et al., 2014)
Time spent alone	Time spent alone in public spaces declined, while time spent in groups in public spaces increased	1979–2010	143,593 people were coded in four public spaces	Multi-year measure	Human coding of time-lapsed film and video	(Hampton et al., 2015)
Bullying	1. (1) School-related violent victimizations declined 2. (2) Bullying and peer victimization declined	1992–2011	*N*~160,000 youth age 12–18 each year	Multi-year survey	National Crime Victimization Survey	(Finkelhor, 2014)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Bullying	1. (1) Physical fighting and fighting on school property declined 2. (2) No significant changes in bullying between 2009 and 2011 nationally 3. (3) School bullying declined in Massachusetts	1991–2011	*N*~12,000–17,000 high school students each year	Multi-year survey	Youth Risk Behaviors Survey	(Finkelhor, 2014)
Bullying	Students reporting being a perpetrator or a victim of bullying declined	1998–2010	*N*~4,500 6th–10th grade students each year	Multi-year survey	Health Behavior in School-Age Children Study	(Finkelhor, 2014)
Bullying	Exposure to threat of interpersonal injury at school declined, except among students who reported being victimized	1991–2010	*N*~2,500 high school seniors from 125 high schools each year	Multi-year survey	Monitoring the Future	(Finkelhor, 2014)
Bullying	Pushing, grabbing, and shoving on school property declined	1995–2010	6th, 9th, 12th graders (*N* not reported)	Multi-year survey	Minnesota Survey on Bullying	(Finkelhor, 2014)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
Bullying	Physical intimidation, emotional victimization, and peer and sibling assault declined	2006, 2009, 2011	*N*~4,500 children each year	Multi-year survey	National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence	(Finkelhor, 2014)
Bullying	1. (1) Online harassment, driven by direct online harassment increased 2. (2) Distressing harassment increased proportional to the increase in overall harassment 3. (3) Repeated harassment by the same person increased. (4) Bullying perpetration increased	2000, 2005, 2010	*N* = 4,561 youth age 10–17 who use the Internet	Multi-year survey	Youth Internet Safety Survey	(Jones et al., 2013)
Tolerance	Tolerance for others with controversial beliefs and lifestyles increased	1972–2012	*N* = 35,048 adults (nationally representative)	Multi-year survey	General Social Survey	(Twenge, Carter, et al., 2015)
Narcissism	No change in narcissism over time	1982–2007	*N* = 26,867 college students at the University of	Multi-year survey	Narcissistic Personality Index (Raskin & Hall, 1979)	(Trzesniewski et al., 2008)

Variable	Change over time	Time period	Participants	Study type	Measure/ Survey	Citation
			California (Davis, Santa Cruz, and Berkeley)			
Self-enhancement	No change in self-enhancement over time	1976–2006	*N* = 410,527 high school seniors and college students at the University of California (Davis, Santa Cruz, and Berkeley)	Multi-year survey	University of California introductory psychology testing sessions, Monitoring the Future	(Trzesniewski et al., 2008)
Narcissism	No change in narcissism over time	1996–2008	*N* = 30,073 college students at the University of California (Davis and Berkeley)	Multi-year survey	Narcissistic Personality Index (Raskin & Hall, 1979)	(Donnellan et al., 2009)

([1]) Monitoring the Future

([2]) The American Freshman

([3]) General Social Survey

Changes Over Time in Self-Focused Variables

We next review changes over time in more *self-focused* personality traits, attitudes, and cultural indicators.

Self-Focused Traits

Cross-Temporal meta-analyses

Narcissism is a personality trait involving excessively positive self-views, in combination with low empathy (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). A cross-temporal meta-analysis found that narcissism significantly increased in American college students between 1979 and 2006 (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Keith Campbell, & Bushman, 2008), and continued to rise between 2006 and 2008 (Twenge & Foster, 2010). Narcissism was even found to be increasing between 1994 and 2006 on a single college campus (Twenge & Foster, 2010). Since narcissism by definition includes low empathy, it is possible that young adults with an increasing self-focus might find it difficult to have compassion for others.

Next, *self-esteem* measures how positively or negatively people view themselves (Rosenberg, 1965). People who score higher in self-esteem also tend to score higher in narcissism (Watson, Little, Sawrie, & Biderman, 1992). The main difference between them is that it is possible to have high self-esteem and care about others, but narcissistic people have high self-esteem and also devalue others (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). A cross-temporal meta-analysis found that self-esteem increased from 1968 to 1994 in college students, but it had a more complex pattern in elementary and junior high school students: decreasing from 1965 to 1979, then increasing from 1980 to 1993 (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). A second cross-temporal meta-analysis found that it increased in middle-school, high-school, and college students between 1988 and 2008 (Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010). Because self-esteem is correlated with narcissism (Watson et al., 1992), this increase in self-esteem could indicate that younger generations are becoming less compassionate over time. However, given that it is possible to have high self-esteem and care about others (Campbell et al., 2002), it is also possible that changes in self-esteem are not indicative of changes in compassion.

Multi-Year surveys

In addition to the cross-temporal meta-analyses discussed above, a multi-year study compared undergraduate and graduate students in 2004–2008 to undergraduates before 1990 and found a significant increase on the narcissism measures of the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1956; Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010). However, caution must be used in interpreting this study, because the comparison groups differed.

Agentic traits focus on the self (e.g., ambition, competence) while *communal traits* focus on others (e.g., cooperativeness, understanding of others; Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). People with higher levels of empathy also tend to have fewer agentic traits (Davis, 1983). Between 1966 and 2009, there was an increase in agentic traits among first-year college students taking the American Freshman Survey (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012a). This suggests that there was a rise in self-focused traits across this time period, with potential implications for compassion toward others.

Self-Focused Attitudes and Values

Multi-Year surveys

Intrinsic motivation involves doing things because they are interesting or enjoyable, and *extrinsic motivation* involves doing things for external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). People who are intrinsically motivated also tend to have a more prosocial personality (Finkelstien, 2009). The Monitoring the Future Study includes questions about desired job rewards in future employment. The value placed on more self-focused job rewards (e.g., *leisure rewards* such as vacation time and *extrinsic rewards* such as prestige) increased in high school students between 1976 and 2006, while the value placed on less self-focused rewards (e.g., *intrinsic rewards* such as having an interesting job and *social rewards* such as making friends) decreased across this time period (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). However, the desire for *altruistic rewards* did not change over time (Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2010).

Another study examined changes in general life goals in the Monitoring the Future Study and the American Freshman Survey. These can be more intrinsic/other-focused, such as making a contribution to society; or more extrinsic/self-focused, such as being financially well-off. Students' intrinsic life (p. 345) goals decreased between 1966 and 2009, while their extrinsic life goals increased across that same time period (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). Given that people who are intrinsically motivated also tend to have a more prosocial personality (Finkelstien, 2009), it is possible that the decreases in intrinsic rewards and increases in extrinsic rewards have implications for compassion-related responses.

Self-Focused Cultural Indicators

Individualism (independence) involves seeing oneself as separate and unique from others and valuing one's own goals and desires above others' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Focusing on the self probably makes it more difficult for individuals to be compassionate towards others (Wiehe, 2004). Researchers have examined indicators of individualism in American cultural products over time.

There have been increases in individualistic/independent words and phrases in American *books*, from 1960 to 2008 (Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2012b) and from 1860 to 2006 (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015). In addition, the use of the term "self-esteem" in American books increased from 1900 to 2000 (Konrath & Anderson, 2011), and first-person singular (e.g., "I") and second-person pronouns (e.g., "you") became more common between 1960 and 2008 (Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2013). Parallel changes were again observed when examining self-focused words in *songs*, with an increase in the number of self-focused and antisocial words in song lyrics from 1980 to 2007 (DeWall et al., 2011). Finally, another study found increases in the use of words that indicate self-interest (e.g., first-person pronouns) in U.S. presidential State of the Union speeches between 1790 and 2012 (Chopik et al., 2014).

However, there are other cultural indicators of individualism besides words or phrases. The Social Security Administration (SSA) maintains a database of first names given to babies each year since 1879 (SSA, 2015). Overall, American parents were significantly more likely to give their baby a unique name between 1880 and 2012, [3] with the pattern most pronounced after 1950 (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015; Twenge, Abebe, et al., 2010). Other changes at the household and family level follow similar patterns. For example, research based on U.S. Census data finds that the frequency of single-child families, single-generation households, and adults living alone has increased, while the average family size has decreased since 1860 (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015). Finally, according to governmental records, divorce rates have increased significantly since 1900 (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015).

Summary of Results

There have been changes at the individual, family, and societal level in a number of self-focused variables. In general, there have been significant *increases* in self-focused traits, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Cultural indicators also point to a trend toward increased individualism in American society (see Table 25.1 for a detailed summary). Given these increases in narcissism, self-esteem, agentic traits, and extrinsic motivations and goals, coupled with cultural trends toward individualistic values, we can further clarify the overall trends in compassion-related variables. Increases in these traits, attitudes, and values indicate that people are becoming more self-focused and may be less likely to be compassionate.

Potential Explanations

Together, the bulk of the evidence suggests broad cultural shifts toward a decreased focus on others and an increased focus on the self, in the years leading to the first decade of the twenty-first century. How and why might such cultural changes occur? There are two theoretical frameworks that we draw on when making sense of these results (see Figure 25.1).

Ecological Models

First, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) theory on the ecology of human development provides a framework from which we can view these changes over time. It points to the complexity of trying to pinpoint specific causes when there are many simultaneous changes occurring in society at a variety of different levels. Ecological models encompass multiple levels of analysis, beginning with the individual-level *microsystem*, which includes one's immediate day-to-day environments. Microsystems include individuals themselves, along with their families and close friends, nested within physical contexts like homes, schools, churches, workplaces, and neighborhoods. The *mesosystem* includes the relationships between a person's microsystems, such as the interactions between family members, friends, and school. The *exosystem* includes larger social structures that influence the individual's microsystems, such as the government, mass media, and the economy. Finally, the *macrosystem* refers to overarching cultural values such as capitalism, individualism, and inequality (p. 346) tolerance. Contemporary adaptations of this theoretical framework, such as Harrison et al.'s (2011) Six-C's model might be especially fruitful in better understanding reasons for changes over time in compassion-related variables.

These theoretical frameworks can be helpful in understanding the dynamic and reciprocal changes that occur across different ecological levels. Although we cannot clearly determine whether parallel changes that have occurred at each of the ecological levels have directly influenced changes over time in compassion-related variables, we can use ecological frameworks to organize the evidence for plausible causal factors.

For example, work on dispositional empathy finds that parenting, which is part of the *microsystem*, can influence children's empathy levels (Fortuna & Knafo, 2014). If we found evidence of corresponding changes over time in parenting styles, this would be suggestive of one potential cause of declining compassion. Other research finds that exposure to prosocial media can lead to increases in empathy and prosocial behavior (Coyne & Smith, 2014), and that mobile phones can both disrupt and enhance social connections and empathy (Davis et al., 2016). The seismic shifts in the media landscape with the introduction, rapid adoption, and increasing dependence upon the Internet and mobile phones (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2012; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013), especially among younger Americans (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010), suggest a plausible causal role at broader ecological levels (i.e. *exosystem*). Similarly, changes in compassion-related variables have coincided with dramatic rises other broader ecological variables such as income inequality (Atkinson & Bourguignon, 2014; Heathcote, Perri, & Violante, 2010; Piketty, 2014) and declines in religious participation in the United States since the 1950s (Grant, 2008; Putnam, 2001; Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sastry, & Campbell, 2015).
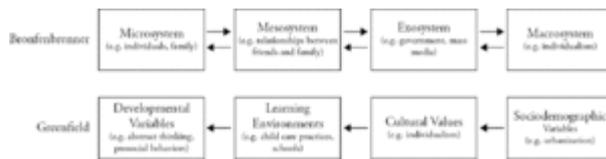
Click to view larger

Figure 25.1 Theoretical frameworks.

It goes beyond the scope of this chapter to systematically review all evidence at each of these levels of analysis, but doing so in future research could help us isolate which ecological levels are most likely to respond to interventions. However, it should be noted that these different levels probably mutually affect each other, so fixating on only one particular causal factor (e.g., social media) is not likely to be productive.

Theory of Social Change and Human Development

In her theory of social change and human development, Greenfield (2009) argues that changes in societal-level sociodemographic conditions such as urbanization, relative wealth, or average education levels can lead to cultural shifts such as those reviewed in this chapter. There are some conceptual overlaps between ecological models and Greenfield's theorizing (see Figure 25.1), with the main difference between them being that the latter is clearer about the direction of causality. Greenfield contends that changes in sociodemographic conditions (e.g., urbanization) can change core cultural values such as individualism, which in turn can change learning environments such as child care practices or school environments. Learning environments then influence human development, including both cognitive development (e.g., attention to detail, abstract thinking) and social development (e.g., prosocial behaviors).

Greenfield posits that sociodemographic changes shift on a continuum between *Gemeinshaft* and *Gesellschaft. Gemeinshaft*, the German word for *community*, is used to describe rural, small-scale communities with relatively low technology and education. These communities are generally poor, self-contained, and homogeneous. In contrast, *Gesellschaft*, the German word for *society*, is used to describe large, complex, urban societies with more access to technology and education. These societies are generally wealthier, more diverse, and have (p. 347) more contact with the outside world. When these sociodemographic factors shift in either direction, the developmental variables are also likely to shift in the same direction. For example, a society that is becoming more urban is likely to later become more individualistic. This in turn could lead to more formalized education through child care centers and formal school systems. Finally, these changes can lead to more abstract thinking and less interdependent social relationships. However, shifts from Gemeinshaft towards Gesellschaft have become more common as the world becomes more urban, wealthy, high tech, and highly educated (Greenfield, 2009).

Summary

Overall, it is difficult to establish a specific answer to the question of why individual-level traits and values and broader cultural-level indicators have appeared to shift towards an increased self-focus and a decreased other-focus up until the early part of the twenty-first century. However, there are two key theoretical frameworks that can help increase our understanding of this question.

Counter-Evidence

So far, we have presented evidence for a decline in compassion-related traits, values, and cultural indicators in the United States, but it is also important to present evidence that does not fit this pattern.

Cross-Temporal meta-analyses

Loneliness is the perception of social and/or emotional isolation (Weiss, 1973), and high-empathy people tend to be less lonely (Beadle, Brown, Keady, Tranel, & Paradiso, 2012; Davis, 1983). In a cross-temporal meta-analysis of the UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, 1996; Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978), loneliness actually declined between 1978 and 2009 (Clark, Loxton, & Tobin, 2014). This may be because technological advances have made it increasingly easier to connect with close others, even as our close social network sizes are diminishing over time (McPherson et al., 2006).

Multi-Year surveys

Similarly, in the Monitoring the Future Study, high school seniors reported lower levels of loneliness between 1991 and 2012 (Clark et al., 2014). Again, corresponding changes in technology may help explain this apparent paradox.

In a study that compared time-lapse film of public spaces in 1979 and 1980 to videos of the same public spaces from 2008 to 2010, fewer people spent time alone, and more people spent time in groups between 2008 and 2010 than in 1979 and 1980. In addition, mobile phones were used more often in spaces where people are more likely to walk alone (Hampton, Goulet, & Albanesius, 2015).

In terms of compassion-related traits, there are at least two studies that contradict the finding that narcissism has increased in college students (Twenge & Foster, 2010). In one, there was no evidence that narcissism has increased between 1982 and 2007 (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2009; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008). There was also no evidence that self-enhancement increased in high school seniors between 1976 and 2006 (Trzesniewski et al., 2008). However, the authors used different methods to analyze and interpret the data than are typically used in studies examining changes over time.

As for compassion-related attitudes, tolerance is an indicator of how accepting people are of controversial views or lifestyles (Twenge, Carter, & Campbell, 2015). People who are higher in emotional empathy also tend to be significantly more tolerant of others who are different or stigmatized, but slightly less tolerant of individuals who are intolerant of others (Butrus & Witenberg, 2013). The General Social Survey includes questions about tolerance for many different kinds of people. There was a significant increase in tolerance for people with controversial views or lifestyles between 1972 and 2012 (Twenge, Carter, et al., 2015). Increases in tolerance for controversial lifestyles such as homosexuality were especially large, while tolerance for controversial views such as racism did not increase very much over time (Twenge, Carter, et al., 2015). Increasing tolerance for others might indicate more compassion for others. However, tolerance at its basic level involves a respect for uniqueness and difference, and therefore it can also be an expression of individualism. Compassion goes much deeper than simply tolerating others, by loving, accepting, and caring for them.

Shifting to compassion-related behaviors: *bullying* occurs when one person repeatedly says or does something with the intention of hurting another person (Craig, 1998; Nansel et al., 2001). Bullies tend to be low in emotional empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). There have been numerous surveys that have asked middle and high school students about bullying behavior. Overall, as can be seen in Table 25.1, while some types of bullying are increasing (e.g., online harassment; Finkelhor, 2014), rates of bullying perpetration and victimization in general decreased between 1991 and 2011 (Finkelhor, 2014). This might be because of increased awareness and interventions around bullying. Television, movies, and books frequently introduce issues of bullying, and schools often teach about the negative consequences of bullying. Perhaps these direct appeals to decrease bullying, and policies that enforce consequences in the presence of bullying, partially explain the apparent decreases in bullying between 1991 and 2011.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Throughout this chapter, we have presented evidence for declining focus on other people and an increasing focus on the self. While there is some evidence that does not fit this overall trend, such as decreasing rates of bullying and loneliness and increasing tolerance for controversial views, nearly all of the evidence confirms this shift from other-focus to self-focus (see Table 25.1).

Implications

Being caring and concerned for others is often seen as a key moral virtue with intrinsic value in itself, but it also has some important implications. Other-focused traits (e.g., empathic concern, compassion) and behaviors (e.g., prosocial behavior) are associated with benefits both for the self and for others. In terms of personal benefits, compassionate traits and behaviors are associated with higher well-being, including lower anxiety and stress, and better physical health (Konrath, 2014, 2016; Konrath & Brown, 2013; Seppala, Rossomando, & Doty, 2013). In terms of interpersonal benefits, compassionate traits and behaviors are associated with more frequent and numerous social connections, and closer and more satisfying interpersonal relationships (Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Konrath, 2016; Konrath & Grynberg, 2016). Given the potential benefits of compassion and prosocial behavior to both the self and others, changes in these traits and behaviors over time would be likely to have important implications for individuals and social relationships. In turn, ecological and developmental theories of cultural change suggest that changes in core social connections between people can have broader societal implications.

Limitations and Future Directions

All of the research presented in this review is from the United States, since most of the current research has been conducted there. Although there is some research from other countries that we did not cover (e.g., Billstedt et al., 2016; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Lindfors, Solantaus, & Rimpelä, 2012), there is generally very little cross-cultural research. Of particular interest would be changes over time within more collectivist cultures. Future reviews should examine to what extent these changes are occurring across cultures, and what factors might influence such changes. Similarly, although some of the research examined changes since the late 1700s and early 1800s, most of the research is limited to approximately 1970 to 2010. There needs to be more research examining longer periods of time. Finally, most of the cross-temporal meta-analyses presented covered very specific populations, usually college students. Many of the nationally representative surveys involved high school or college students. Future research should continue to focus on nationally representative groups to the extent that the data are available.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, we defined compassion as an awareness that another person is in pain or suffering, coupled with wanting to do something to alleviate that suffering (Goetz et al., 2010). Overall, the bulk of the evidence suggests that compassion-related variables have been declining over time, while self-focused variables have been simultaneously increasing. The implications are potentially troubling if these trends continue well into the twenty-first century.

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Notes:

(1.) These two studies used very different methods of determining collectivist and individualistic words. In the first study, a list of 20 individualistic words and 20 individualistic phrases were created by asking a sample of American adults to generate individualistic words, then asking a second sample of American adults rate how individualistic the words were. The same procedure was used to generate the list of individualistic phrases (Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2012b). In the second study, researchers built lists of individualistic words and phrases using common scales of individualism to create a lists based on the view of cultural psychologists (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015). Despite the different methods used to determine collectivist and individualistic words and phrases, both studies found similar changes over time in American books.

(2.) It should be noted that this study and the study examining pronoun use in American books classified pronouns differently. In this study examining State of the Union addresses, plural first-person pronouns (e.g., "we") were classified as self-oriented, while the study examining American books classified plural first-person pronouns as other-oriented. Similarly, this study classified other-person (or second-person) pronouns (e.g., "you") as other-oriented, while the previous study classified them as self-oriented.

(4.) ABC News/Washington Post Polls typically sample ~1,000 adults for each poll (nationally representative), and Gallup/Princeton Survey Research Associates polls typically sample ~1,500 adults for each poll (nationally representative).

(3.) One study focused on the percentage of children receiving the 20 most popular names for their gender (Grossmann & Varnum, 2015), while the other study examined the percentage of babies who received the most popular name, or one of the 10, 25, or 50 most popular names for the year they were born (Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010).

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