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From Students, Less Kindness for Strangers?

By PAMELA PAUL

FED up with the Me-Me-Me [MySpace](#) generation? Inclined to believe today's young 'uns are blindingly self-aggrandizing and entitled? According to a major new study of college students, you may well be right.

Vindication for crotchety Gen-Xers — already depressed to find themselves the elders in this social relationship — arrived in a paper presented in May at the annual meeting of the Association for Psychological Science in Boston. “Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis,” by Sara Konrath, a researcher at the [University of Michigan](#), found that college students today are 40 percent less empathetic than those of 30 years ago, with the numbers plunging primarily after 2000.

Previous studies have tussled over how to define empathy. Is it a cognitive mechanism through which we imagine how another person feels? A manifestation of sympathy? Do we empathize with others purely to reduce our own levels of stress?

The field has yet to settle on a definition. But for the purposes of this study, Dr. Konrath [measured four aspects](#) of “interpersonal sensitivity”: Empathic concern, or sympathy, over the misfortunes of others; perspective taking, an intellectual capacity to imagine other people's points of view; fantasy or people's tendency to identify imaginatively with fictional characters in books or movies; and personal distress, which refers to the anguish one feels during others' misfortunes. (For example, “When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces.”)

Today's students scored significantly lower in empathic concern (a 48 percent decrease) and perspective taking (34 percent), considered the more important indices of empathy. In a decisively everyone-for-themselves manner, they are less likely to agree with statements like “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me” and “I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.” This is particularly notable since these are considered shared social ideals: people are more likely to

say they agree than they really do.

Previous studies have documented an increasing narcissism among college students since the late 1980s. And Americans in general perceive decreases in other people's kindness and helpfulness.

"I'm not surprised," said Dr. Bruce Perry, a child psychiatrist and an author of a new book "Born to Love: Why Empathy Is Essential — and Endangered." "But I was hoping it wasn't as rapid a deterioration as this study suggests."

What happened? "We don't actually know what the causes are at this point," Dr. Konrath said. But the authors speculate a millennial mixture of video games, social media, reality TV and hyper-competition have left young people self-involved, shallow and unfettered in their individualism and ambition.

The implications are hardly superficial. Low empathy is associated with criminal behavior, violence, sexual offenses, aggression when drunk and other antisocial behaviors. Depressing news. Just don't expect the next generation to sigh over it, too.