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# Adulting is Hard: Anxiety and Insecurity in the Millennial Generation's Coming of Age Process

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Adulthood is Hard: Anxiety and Insecurity in the Millennial Generation's Coming of Age Process

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of the  
Prerequisite for Honors  
in Sociology  
under the advisement of Thomas Cushman

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## INTRODUCTION

Like most generations during their youth, the Millennial generation has borne the brunt of constant criticism from members of older generations. In the infamous TIME Magazine article, “Millennials, the Me Me Me Generation,” today’s young adults are described as narcissistic, obsessed with fame and self-promotion, emotionally fragile, lazy, and entitled (Stein 2013). This stereotype has pervaded popular rhetoric regarding Millennials and has expanded to include criticisms of apathy, low voter turnout, and lack of respect for authority. However, sociological commentary on this generation is sparse, and there has yet to exist a detailed understanding of the subjective experiences of these individuals within their specific temporal and cultural contexts. This thesis explores the intersection between modernity and generational theories by focusing on the factors leading to anxiety and insecurity in the Millennial generation, with a further goal of understanding the complex dynamic of identity formation among young people in what Anthony Giddens has termed high modernity.<sup>1</sup>

As a cornerstone of sociology, modernity theory provides insight on how the de-traditionalization and increasing fluidity of modern society can lead to unease, insecurity, and anxiety at the individual level. However, most modernity theories often ignore the intersectionality of factors such as gender, race, and social class that lead to a differentiation in experiences. Furthermore, an aspect of identity almost entirely ignored, despite its relevance in understanding the unique influences of modernity on different subgroups, is generational identity. As we progress into high modernity, gender, race, and social class are becoming increasingly fluid, yet age necessarily

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<sup>1</sup> Giddens calls high modernity (also late modernity), “the current phase of development of modern institutions, marked by the radicalising and globalising of basic traits of modernity” (1991:243). I will use high modernity to refer to the period between 1990 and the present.

remains fixed. Despite its potential as a more consistent lens through which to view the consequences of modernization, the study of generations remains an overlooked component of modernity theory. Individuals and their paths through life are affected by the historical time and place in which they live; because of the importance of coming of age and entering adulthood in identity formation, each generation is particularly influenced by the sociocultural context in which they entered the adult world. Generational theory finds both similarities and discrepancies in patterns between age cohorts, but acknowledges and emphasizes the importance of social context for the life course.

While all living generations in the United States are influenced by the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a fully modernized society where technology is rapidly advancing, constant communication and connection is expected, and the individual is often prioritized over the community – Millennials have the distinction of coming of age during this era of uncertainty. Changing social structures have made the process of becoming an adult in modern society very different from previously established pathways, and the alienating and anxiety-inducing character of modern social life due to the dilapidation of traditional structures and the rise of individualism has a unique effect on 21<sup>st</sup> century young people's transition to adulthood. The Millennial generation is coming of age in an era that is distinctly de-traditionalized, individual, and technologically advanced, and as a result is presented with a specific set of challenges.

This thesis will provide an initial look at how the overlapping contexts of modern life and generation make today's young adults susceptible to unique forms of existential anxiety and insecurity. My aim is to answer several research questions: What defines the Millennial generation? What do Millennials fear and what makes them anxious? Are they able to cope with negative emotions? How do cultural values (including those regarding parenting) play a role in the development of these anxieties? How is the anxiety of Millennials a product of modernity and the

social context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How are Millennials able to develop a sense of self despite these anxieties? To answer these questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with 25 young adults ages 17 to 27 in the Bay Area and Northern Central Coast of California. My analysis of this data uses the two aforementioned overlapping branches of sociology: modernity theory regarding ontological insecurity, anxiety, and fear as distinctly modern phenomena and generational theory linking historical time with the individual life course

First, I summarize the relevant literature regarding modernity theory, generational theory, emerging adulthood, and the Millennial generation and describe the methodology of my study as well as the sample of young adults interviewed. In Chapter 2, I discuss the generational identity of Millennials, focusing on how Millennials understand themselves as individuals and as a generation. In Chapter 3, I explore Millennials' expectations for adulthood and the accompanying anxieties and fears for the future. In Chapter 4, I discuss Millennials' use of social media as well as the reflexive comparison in which they engage. Oftentimes, this comparison results in insecurities, which are also discussed. In Chapter 5, I outline the coping strategies Millennials use to overcome their anxieties, fears, and insecurities. I also explore the role of young adults' relationships with their parents and Millennials' views on mental health. I conclude with a summary of my findings, implications, and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

### RELEVANT LITERATURE

#### **An Introduction to Modernity Theory**

Since its inception, the field of sociology has prioritized modernity and the consequences of the rapid social changes that followed the Industrial Revolution. At its basis, modernity represents the deterioration of traditional structures and relationships. Anthony Giddens (1990) equates modernity to a destructive “juggernaut” with a double-edged character: for everything that modernity gives, it takes something away. A key component of the sociological canon, modernity theory consists of a variety of perspectives that seek to understand the social and cultural consequences of modernization. This thesis will focus on theory regarding high or late modernity (the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond). The major ideas discussed are the balance between security and anxiety, the reflexive construction of the self, emotions, and choice.

#### *Security and Anxiety*

Giddens emphasizes that human existence and relationships are built upon a baseline of trust (Giddens 1991:38). Until this trust is broken it is generally unstated and implicit in social life. While we trust that our barista will not poison our coffee, that our house will not fall down around us, and that our airplane will bring us safely to our destination, we do not often pause to consider the idea that we are “trusting” in these things. Giddens describes this type of trust – being comfortable with our surrounding reality – as “ontological security” and emphasizes that it is required for functional social life. Primarily, we trust in “abstract systems,” institutions that govern day-to-day life such as government, currency, social norms, and traffic rules (Giddens 1991). As children, we build “a sort of emotional inoculation against ontological anxieties,” the fear that the systems in which we trust will fail (Giddens 1991:39). By learning from our parents, we create a

“protective cocoon” of hope and trust around ourselves to maintain ontological security and to exist without descending into constant anxiety (40).

However, ontological security and trust are fundamentally precarious, particularly within the constantly changing and fluid context of modernity:

The crisis-prone nature of late modernity thus has unsettling consequences in two respects: it fuels a general climate of uncertainty which an individual finds disturbing no matter how far he seeks to put it to the back of his mind; and it inevitably exposes everyone to a diversity of crisis situations of greater or lesser importance, crisis situations which may sometimes threaten the very core of self-identity. (Giddens 1991:185)

As traditional structures are deconstructed, modernity is accompanied by uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> Particularly, when abstract systems fail, existential anxiety, angst, and dread are introduced at both a social and individual level (Giddens 1990;1991). For example, if an individual is robbed, they may question their physical safety, lose trust in social norms, and experience deep anxiety about walking alone at night, an activity that previously would not garner a second thought; if a society experiences an economic failure, such as the Great Recession in 2008, many individuals may lose faith in the stock market or in banks and experience anxiety regarding their financial security. Globalization, as well, exposes a greater number of people to failures of abstract systems that do not affect their daily life but still generate uncertainty and unease.

While most individuals exist with some level of existential anxiety, trust in abstract systems as a means of establishing ontological security is requisite for functional existence in society, and even in the face of rapid change and instability such as that brought on by modernity human beings must find something in which to place their trust. Giddens emphasizes:

every human individual could (in principle) be overwhelmed by anxieties about risks which are implied by the very business of living. That sense of ‘invulnerability’ which blocks off

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that theories regarding existential uncertainty have been a central tenet of sociology since its inception. Emile Durkheim, often considered the father of sociology, developed the concept of “anomie,” or social normlessness. While he attributed anomie to a lack of social regulation, it is at heart a form of socially-experienced uncertainty and existential anxiety.

negative possibilities in favour of a generalized attitude of hope derives from *basic trust*. (Giddens 1991:40, emphasis mine)

### *Identity and Construction of the Self*

Beyond defining the relationship between trust and anxiety in modern life, Giddens describes how modernity forces individuals to find new means of creating an identity. Because traditional patterns can no longer be followed, each person must undergo a “construction of the self.” Historically, people followed the path dictated by their family and social class, and identity was less important because it was socially imposed; now, as a consequence of modernity, de-traditionalization allows for new opportunity structures. Giddens describes the increasing importance of self-identity in modernity: once individuals are no longer bound by traditional structures, they are presented with the opportunity to build a “life project” and to pursue self-actualization (Giddens 1991).

This construction of the self is, importantly, a reflexive project:

Self-identity...is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. (Giddens 1991:52)

To establish a self-identity, individuals must be constantly aware of themselves and their actions, using their social environment to define themselves and establish a trajectory for their lives (Giddens 1991:148). Giddens emphasizes that humans engage pragmatically: human actions are often responses to environmental cues, and behavior is constantly re-adapted to respond to the situation and to others (Giddens 1991). This back-and-forth is defined as “reflexivity,” a core component of modernity relevant to both institutions and the individual. In modernity, reflexivity “consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character” (Giddens 1990:38). Giddens goes on to say, however, that this reflexivity is “deeply unsettling” because if a social world is understood and developed purely reflexively, nothing can ever be permanent, finite, or certain

(1990:39). In this way, while reflexive identity development allows for a multitude of opportunity structures, it can also be anxiety-provoking.

In a similar vein, Erik Erikson (1968) defines identity as subjective, continuously developed through active choices, and at the core of both the individual and “his communal culture” (22). Primarily, identity formation is a dialectical process accomplished between a person and those around them.

[I]dentity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. (Erikson 1968:22-23)

Although a subjective concept, identity is inextricable from social context; in Giddens’ and Erikson’s theories, identity is driven by constant reflexivity and engagement with others.

In the added complexity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, individuals must be self-aware and engage with others both in-person and online, are constantly surrounded by excessive stimuli (such as emails, text messages, news reports, and political articles), and are presented with numerous opportunities to self-reflect through social media. This leads to hyper-reflexivity beyond that described by Giddens, particularly due to the role that social media plays in how we view ourselves and others: today’s society requires an ability to create and control one’s image both online and in-person.

The reflexivity of identity creation interacts with both ontological security and existential anxiety. Being reflexive helps assuage existential anxiety by providing constant reinforcement. Yet, because identity is reinforced by the self in conjunction with others, modern individuals may lack grounding and feel unmoored, uncertain, and anxious regarding their place in the world. The inevitability of invidious comparison – both through social media and other interpersonal exposure – can also lead to anxiety, resentment, and disassociation (Cushman 2015:61). Giddens sees this as the modern threat of personal meaninglessness, a threat only held at bay by basic trust and

ontological security. In turn, however, “rising anxiety tends to threaten awareness of self-identity, since awareness of the self in relation to constituting features of the object-world becomes obscured” (Giddens 1991:45). In modernity, the dichotomy between self-identity and ontological security is tenuous and fragile.

Nevertheless, Giddens emphasizes the power of modern “disembedding” mechanisms to provide the individual with control:

The disembedding mechanisms intrude into the heart of self-identity... they allow the self (in principle) to achieve much greater mastery over the social relations and social contexts reflexively incorporated into the forging of self-identity than was previously possible. (Giddens 1991:149)

The first of these disembedding mechanisms is time-space distantiation, which Giddens highlights as a key facet of modernity; with advanced technology, social interaction does not require coexistence in space and time. The second is the mediated experience of reality: as globalization and technology both advance, we experience more and more of the global reality through mediated channels such as television and the internet (Giddens 1991). Reflexivity – and the construction of the self – can now be conducted in physical and temporal isolation, through mediated channels such as social media, email, and phone conversations. While this requires the aforementioned constant self-awareness, it places control of the life trajectory and self into the hands of the individual person and not traditional structures. As a result of disembedding mechanisms, “the discovery of oneself becomes a project directly involved with the reflexivity of modernity” (Giddens 1990:122). The “life project” is an individualized path to identity formation that is nevertheless directly linked to the modern social context.

### *Emotions in Modernity and the Therapeutic Self*

With the lack of traditional life structures, modernity forces individuals to create their own narrative. Eva Illouz (2007) emphasizes the modern role of emotions and emotional life in identity creation, and believes that humans orient their identity towards a search for emotional fulfillment

and reflexively pursue an emotional narrative that will allow them to develop a positive image in the eyes of others. Primarily, she states that “much of social arrangements are also emotional arrangements” (Illouz 2007:3), and because the control of emotions is central to social and cultural order, “communication thus defines a new form of social competence in which emotional and linguistic self-management aim at establishing patterns of social recognition” (21). Illouz emphasizes the social value of “emotional literacy” – being able to understand and utilize the emotions of oneself and others – in a culture that prioritizes emotions.

Her theory delineates the ways in which capitalism has intensified the emotional side of human existence, particularly through marketing designed to encourage the purchase of emotional happiness. Most importantly, the reflexivity of modernity requires emotional awareness and understanding, both of oneself and of others. In what she terms “emotional capitalism,” Illouz sees the rise of the emotional self and a therapeutic culture designed to cater to the development of human emotional well-being. This therapeutic society stems from the increasing relevance of psychology in modernity, and puts emotions at the forefront of human focus. By valuing emotions, previous class delineations are erased in favor of a new form of capital: suffering. “[P]sychic misery – in the form of a narrative in which the self has been injured – has now become a feature of the identity shared by both laborers and well-to-do people” (Illouz 2007:42). While in the past suffering may have been hidden from public view, modern “therapeutic culture paradoxically privileges suffering and trauma” (52). Rather than being limited to the bourgeoisie, narratives of suffering and the formation of a therapeutic narrative of selfhood are at the center of identity-creation for nearly all modern individuals (Silva 2012).

In his seminal work, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), Christopher Lasch also comments on the therapeutic nature of modern society. He describes how therapy has replaced religion:

People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security. (Lasch 1979:7)

Despite being written over 40 years ago, Lasch's social commentary is still partly relevant today. For Lasch, the modern person is purely psychological:

Plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness, the "psychological man" of the twentieth century seeks neither individual self-aggrandizement nor spiritual transcendence but peace of mind, under conditions that increasingly militate against it. (Lasch 1979:13)

The modern person searches for peace through therapy and a focus on mental health, is increasingly dependent on others for self-esteem, and requires an audience for her personal suffering. A defining characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, is the preoccupation with the subjective: for modern individuals, the world is a mirror of the self. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as stated above, the increased prevalence of social media only exacerbates the mirrored nature of the world. Because of social media and the internet, humans no longer need to imagine ourselves being constantly on display; as Erving Goffman (1959) suggests, we *are* always on display.

Lasch highlights the necessity of managing impressions on others and the inevitability of competition due to a desire for the appearance of success. Although he sees self-absorption as a response to the weakening of social ties, this preoccupation with the self results in "self-conscious self-scrutiny" (93), and individuals are forced to seek reassurance in others. Most importantly, Lasch's commentary on the narcissistic society forebodes the most negative consequences of a hyper-reflexive modernity. Left to pursue only an emotional narrative in constant comparison with others, self-absorption offers the only remedy to the existential anxieties of a modern social context increasingly without meaning.

### *Choice*

Illouz's work also covers another key feature of modernity: infinite choice. Once liberated from traditional constraints, individuals are presented with numerous choices regarding their identity

and life path (Illouz 2007), and the balance between rational action and emotional fulfillment is one left to the individual's discretion. Alan Hunt describes anxiety as “the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness” (Hunt 1999): while freeing, the abundance of choice can be anxiety-inducing in its own sense. Liah Greenfeld argues that the freedom of excessive choice can actually cause anxiety in the form of mental illness through the pathological fracturing of the mind (Greenfeld 2013; Cushman 2015). Particularly for young adults who are asked to choose a life path out of infinite options, following a definitive, pre-determined trajectory potentially holds less anxiety. As I will discuss later, in order to combat this anxiety, many young adults initially expect to follow the path blazed by their parents and are confronted with even more uncertainty upon realizing this may not be possible.

### **Generational Theory and Social Structures**

This thesis utilizes a mix of sociology of the life course and generational theory, primarily emphasizing the understanding that generations provide a link between age groups and historical time. Importantly, historical change has different implications for people of different ages, meaning that the Millennial generation will experience the historical changes of modernity in a unique way compared to other age groups. Alwin and McCammon emphasize that people form their worldviews in accord with the social context of when they grew up (2003), so it is not unlikely that the Millennial generation has a specific way of thinking about the world that was shaped by historical events (such as 9/11, the Great Recession, and the Dot Com boom) and the social context of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Because social change occurs simultaneously at the individual level, through aging and individual responses to historical events, and the group level, through the succession of cohorts, the life courses of members of the Millennial generation and their reactions to their environment will inevitably affect the progression of sociocultural history. In the words of Erik Erikson, “the youth of today is not the youth of twenty years ago” (Erikson 1968:26).

While cohorts represent groups of people who share critical experiences during a certain time interval, cohorts and generations are not necessarily the same thing, although they are often referred to interchangeably (Alwin and McCammon 2003). A *generation* is defined as a group of people “who share a distinctive culture and/or a self-conscious identity by virtue of their having experienced the same historical events at roughly the same time in their lives” (27). The difference between a generation and a birth cohort is the component of identity (Alwin and McCammon 2003). Generations share a “generational consciousness” that is dependent on other markers of identity such as race, class, and gender and involves solidarity that is “more potent than any bond of ideological unity” (Feuer 1969:35). As part of generational consciousness, each generation defines its character by its response to the specific historical experiences that mark its adolescence (Feuer 1969:373).

Generations can be divided into different units, sometimes called “micro-generations,” based on other identity variables such as exact birth year, gender, race, and social class (Alwin and McCammon 2003). Because of the identity component and the possibility for further subdivision, Millennials will be referred to as a generation in this thesis, although the extent to which they form a cohesive group will be discussed later.

In his analysis of generations, S. N. Eisenstadt (1956) notes an asymmetry of power between age groups. While in traditional societies role allocation often depended on age, modern societies tend to be increasingly specialized and achievement-oriented, and so role allocation depends less on age, leading to a less dramatic power distribution between generations (Eisenstadt 1956). The power imbalances between generations have the potential to lead to generational conflict and resentment; Feuer believes that young generations experience frustration with a society controlled by older generations, and as a result suffer from a “nameless malaise” (1969:508), or generalized anxiety. He writes that an upset of “generational equilibrium” may result in younger members of society feeling

exploited by older generations (Feuer 1969). As they get older, young people also begin to criticize older generations, leading to the “de-authoritization of the old” (Feuer 1969). As younger generations start to understand how older generations have failed, they become frustrated with the current social order and engage in rebellion and conflict.

More importantly, even in modernity, age groups represent collective identification through the solidarity and cohesion of similarly-aged peers. Particularly during adolescence and the transitional stage into adulthood, age groups are communally oriented towards developing a common identity; however, after reaching adulthood members of these same age groups transition to individual orientation to adapt to the individualism of modern society (Eisenstadt 1956). It is likely, then, that Millennials feel a sense of solidarity with similarly-aged peers, but due to their stage in the life course are redirecting themselves towards an individualistic outlook.

This transition to an individualistic outlook can be anxiety-inducing in its own sense:

Student movements [or generational conflicts] are a manifestation, furthermore, of the trauma of adolescence, which is, in large measure, a trauma of renunciation; the young man must renounce his bookish dreams and ideals and come to terms with reality. He must in other words accept an alienation of part of his self; he must give up part of himself. Not only must he give up a variety of interests to concentrate on a particular craft and job; he must also surrender the egalitarianism of the youth group, the comradeship, the friendship. The student movement is a protest against the alienation from self which the social system exacts. (Feuer 1969:33)

While student movements are less relevant when considering the Millennial generation, the general sense of unease or “malaise” during this transitional stage is reflected more than fifty years after Feuer’s book was published. In this way, generational theory’s admission of the difficult transition between adolescence and adulthood adds another layer to modern factors leading to insecurity. Vice versa, modernity theory provides a useful application to generational theory in considering how an increasingly individualistic and de-traditionalized society might affect traditional notions of generations. By growing up in a hyper-individualistic world, Millennials may be forced to surrender the communal solidarity of their age groups at a younger age, perhaps before developing

generational consciousness, or may feel more solidarity to smaller generational subgroups stratified by other identity markers.

Feuer's acute analysis of the key role of emotions for young adults is important to understanding Millennials, as is his description of the psychological state of loneliness and alienation that results from generational conflict. Nevertheless, Feuer contends that American young people are more likely to accept society as is, have less generational resentment, and not de-authoritize older generations, further indicating the importance of intersectionality in generational theory.

### **Bridging Adolescence and Adulthood**

A key component of generational theory dictates that adolescence and early adulthood are important temporal periods for identity formation. Youth are impressionable and malleable, and form their identity based on their environment (Alwin and McCammon 2003:34-5); Millennials, being young adults, are at the tail end of an important stage in their life cycle, and to cement their identity must engage in

mutual confirmation of individual and community, in the sense that society recognizes the young individual as a bearer of fresh energy and that the individual so confirmed recognizes society as a living process which inspires loyalty as it receives it, maintains allegiance as it attracts it, honors confidence as it demands it. (Erikson 1968:241)

In other words, as they enter society young adults must establish their place while society, in turn, confirms that place.

#### *Identity Confusion and Crisis*

This identity confirmation also occurs in a specific historical context – for Millennials, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – and represents a generational issue as older generations become responsible for providing the value systems that shape the identity formation of the next generation (Erikson 1968: 30). However, as processes of social change intensify in modernity, “rapid technological change makes it impossible for any traditional way of being older to become so institutionalized that the younger generation can step right into it” (38). While in traditional models children can establish

their “hierarchy of expectations” based on the roles filled by the adults in their lives, younger generations in modernity are prevented by changing social structures from directly filling the same roles held by their parents. As previously stated by both Giddens and Erikson, this sociocultural context plays a profound role in identity formation: “Cultural and historical change can prove so traumatic to identity formation: it can break up the inner consistency of a child’s hierarchy of expectations” (Erikson 1968:159). This uncertainty is particularly prevalent for young adults attempting to establish a fixed identity, and can lead to existential anxiety.

Due to this and other anxiety-inducing factors of the transition into adulthood, Erikson describes the stage between adolescence and adulthood as a “normative identity crisis.” This is exacerbated by an adolescent preoccupation with the opinions of others and an ideological tendency to search “for some inspiring unification of tradition or anticipated techniques, ideas, and ideals” (Erikson 1968:130). Adolescence and early adulthood, because of their regenerative and uncertain nature, are stages of “identity confusion” that require settling on a particular life path, but the inability to choose an occupation or find a specific life path can be disturbing to the individual (132). As a result, the “crystallization” of identity during adolescence undergoes numerous conflicts, whether due to changing expectations, social context, or structural barriers.

The identity confusion of late adolescence is so profoundly impactful for the individual that Erikson (1968) refers to late adolescence as a “psychosocial moratorium,” an inevitable stage of life where adult commitments are delayed while identity is established (157). Particularly when faced with structural gaps and uncertainty, the establishment of an identity during adolescence can be

hard on many young Americans because their whole upbringing has made the development of a self-reliant personality dependent on a certain degree of choice, a sustained hope for an individual chance, and a firm commitment to the freedom of self-realization. (Erikson 1968:133)

Many Millennials were raised to believe they would have endless options, could grow up to be anything; as they became older and were confronted by the socioeconomic reality of the world, the

list of possible identities grew shorter. In this study, I hypothesized that this identity confusion would lead to anxiety, insecurity, and even a sense of social isolation due to an inability to find a place in society. Erikson aptly summarizes the insecurity of the bridge between adolescence and adulthood: “in no other stage of the life cycle, then, are the promise of finding oneself and the threat of losing oneself so closely allied” (244).

### *Emerging Adulthood*

In modernity, sociocultural conceptions of adulthood are shifting parallel to structural changes to become less rigid and more individualized. Young people’s trajectories into adulthood are becoming increasingly extended and diversified (Buchmann 1989:83-85). In other words, younger generations are experiencing more gradual and delayed progressions into adulthood with far more individual variation. Conceptualizing this delayed coming of age process, Jeffrey Arnett (2000) coined the term “emerging adulthood” to describe a life stage between late adolescence and early adulthood. Due to demographic changes in modernized societies, Arnett writes that the stage of life between the late teens and early twenties is no longer merely a transitional phase to adulthood, as described by Erikson and earlier theorists. Importantly, this life stage is neither extended adolescence nor “pretend adulthood” (Zilca 2016); rather, the life stage between 18 and 25 years of age is a distinct portion of the life course, marked by profound personal change and exploration (Arnett 2000).

Emerging adulthood is defined primarily by its heterogeneity: emerging adults are not expected to meet a set of normative expectations or fulfill a specific social role. Rather, they fill a “roleless role” that encompasses every possible life path from being a full-time college student to living at home (471).

Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (Arnett 2000:469)

The semi-autonomy, instability, and fluidity of emerging adulthood amount to high levels of uncertainty and a complete disruption of traditional life course structures that mark the early twenties as a time for marriage, children, and stable employment. Essentially, “it is no longer normative for the late teens and early twenties to be a time of entering and settling into long-term adult roles” (469). Because emerging adults are not expected to fulfill a prescribed role, they are allowed the freedom to “try on” a number of possible roles with the goal of eventually establishing their adult identity. Oftentimes, “the explorations of emerging adulthood are in part explorations for their own sake, part of obtaining a broad range of life experiences before taking on enduring – and limiting – adult responsibilities” (474). This independent exploration allows emerging adults to obtain many different experiences as they test out possible life paths; however, freedom is accompanied by deep uncertainty about the future because so many different directions are possible. As emphasized by Illouz (2007) and Hunt (1999), an abundance of choice often leads to anxiety. Furthermore, the independence of emerging adulthood causes many young people to spend most of their time alone. Arnett states that “Young Americans ages 19-29 spend more of their leisure time alone than any persons except the elderly and spend more of their time in productive activities (school and work) alone than any other age group under 40” (474). Echoing Erikson, Arnett describes identity formation in emerging adulthood as lonely and confusing.

Referring again to the intersectionality of generational and modernity theory, Arnett notes that emerging adulthood is a “culturally constructed” concept found only in cultures that allow young people to have a “prolonged period of independent role exploration” (469-470) by “postpon[ing] the entry into adult roles and responsibilities until well past the late teens” (478). Even within American culture, different communities of young adults are provided with different opportunity structures; if a young person is forced to work immediately after turning 18 due to economic necessity, or perhaps has a child at a young age, they may not be granted the exploratory opportunities of

emerging adulthood and may be forced to proceed directly from adolescence to adulthood. Arnett states that members of minority groups or less affluent communities may generally be denied this period of independent exploration (478). Millennials are presently in the age range of emerging adulthood to early adulthood, although their status as either an emerging adult or an adult is dependent on multiple identity factors. Out of the respondents in this study, the vast majority were in the life stage of emerging adulthood.

Satya Byock (2015) also addresses the adolescence-adulthood transition in a response to Carl Jung's three stages of life: childhood, the first half of life, and the second half of life. Jungian psychology traditionally does not focus on the first half of life, which includes the establishment of the self in the external world, the pursuit of employment, skills, and education, and the start of family life (Byock 2015:401). Jung believed the transition into the first half of life would occur organically as individuals faced the "challenges of survival" brought by adulthood (402). Byock's argument counters this statement, emphasizing that cultural shifts have changed the challenges faced by young adults; as a result, the first half of life is one requiring extrinsic identity formation in a social context, and the challenges of survival in adulthood are far more subjective than structural. While Jung originally argued, "For a young person it is almost a sin – and certainly a danger – to be too much occupied with himself" (402), modern young people are necessarily self-absorbed as they attempt to develop an identity and find their place in the world.

### *Subjective Markers of Adulthood*

Without a clear trajectory into adulthood, modern young adults have moved towards an understanding of adulthood as "a feeling or process much more than a rigid set of milestones" (Newman 2012:4-5). While emerging adults believe they are no longer teenagers, they often acknowledge that they do not yet feel like full adults (Arnett 2000:471; Newman 2012). Rather, there exists "an emphasis in emerging adulthood on becoming a self-sufficient person" as a pathway to

adulthood (Arnett 2000:473). Self-sufficiency takes the form of increased responsibility, financial independence, and independent decision-making capabilities. Beyond self-sufficiency, however, young adults attribute adulthood to a process of self-discovery: “you are an adult when you feel like one” (Newman 2012:13).

In modernity, the first half of life is less of a biological transition and more of a subjective and intellectual transition.

Modern individuals in the first half of life are increasingly living the once rare artist’s or entrepreneur’s life, creating unique cultural contributions in their 20s and 30s, often delaying the biological work of starting families for many years or intertwining the two. (Byock 2015:404)

Especially in the United States, the first half of life is increasingly taking place directly after higher education, but

College and all its preceding education instruct in knowledge and thinking and an obsession with success, but not in life, with its failures and joys, and certainly not – absolutely not – in the acceptance and cultivation of instinct. (Byock 2015:404)

As a result, emerging adults are not prepared for real life, because “formal education does not bestow the necessary skills to make the transition from childhood to adulthood effectively” (407).

This is primarily because, through education, young people are taught “the myth of vertical growth,” the idea that there is always a next, higher step to take (405). The modern educational system teaches young people to be risk-averse, to seek perfection, and to be obsessed with success; as a result, Byock argues that modern young people are dependent on others for reinforcement of their identity, directly paralleling both Erikson’s (1968) and Giddens’s (1990) emphasis on the reflexivity of identity development (Byock 2015:404).

Byock, quoting William Deresiewicz, criticizes the effect of modern educational emphasis on vertical growth:

The prospect of not being successful terrifies them [young adults], disorients them. The cost of falling short, even temporarily, becomes not merely practical, but existential. The result is a

violent aversion to risk. You have no margin of error, so you avoid the possibility that you will ever make an error. (405)

This type of perfectionism is a fundamental stereotype of Millennials. Because modern young people were never taught that failure is a normative part of growing up, the dissolution of structural, upward-bound pathways provokes uncertainty, as adolescents now lack the skills to take a blind leap into adulthood: “Where once there was a steady path upwards, clearly defined, there is now only empty space, a black void that one must enter, without the emotional and psychological training to take it on” (406). At a structural level, the transition between adolescence and adulthood (or the entrance into the first half of life) is “socially unsupported” (407), leading to “toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation” (405).

Byock’s key point is that with the dissolution of traditional life course structures and the rise of achievement-oriented education, modern young adults are unable to engage in the type of failure necessary to establish an adult identity in a social structure that lacks a direct pathway into adulthood. In her words, “for the young man or woman trying to figure out how to move into adulthood all on his or her own – now without even the once strong guide of instinct – life is a panic-riddled, obsessively intellectualized affair” (408). As a neurotic consequence of Arnett’s model of emerging adulthood (2000), Byock proposes the potential for a “quarter-life crisis”; unable to manage this transitional stage and having experienced a drastic life event, some emerging adults may withdraw from society as a result of disenchantment (408).

Robinson et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study using interviews with young adults aged 25 to 35 to develop a holistic model of early adult crisis, or “quarter-life crisis.” Defining crises as “emotionally volatile, stress-inducing, time-limited episodes during which a person moves out of an existing life structure and towards a new one” (Robinson et al. 2013:28), their sample consisted of individuals who had experienced a personal crisis during the transition between adolescence and adulthood. These quarter-life crises were marked by oscillation between periods resembling

emerging adulthood and early adulthood and a shift in identity towards authenticity. As a result of undergoing these crises, respondents developed increased intrinsic orientation and decreased extrinsic orientation (35); essentially, entering adulthood required an authentic, subjectively established identity that relied less on others. This is akin to Arnett's emphasis on adulthood being marked by "self-sufficiency" and cements the image of adolescents and emerging adults engaging in dialogue to ultimately establish a unique sense of self. Of the respondents in my study, only two (on the older edge of the age range) described experiencing a quarter-life crisis.

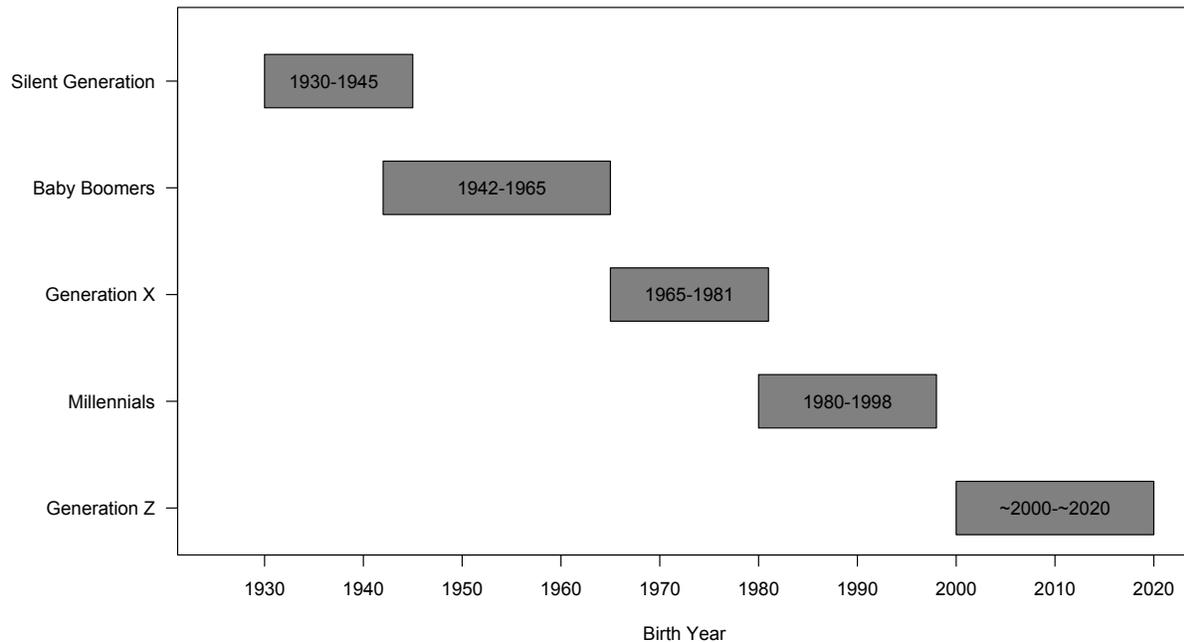
### **Millennials**

Literature on Millennials is limited primarily to the realm of popular culture; while my objective is to unite the concept of the Millennial generation with contemporary concerns in sociology, a review of existing social conceptions may prove useful in understanding how young adults are instructed to view themselves. Termed "Millennials" because they reached maturity at the change of the millennia, this generation was born between approximately 1980 and 2000 (McGinty 2016). They follow Generation X, born between the late 1960s and 1980, and precede Generation Z, generally born in the 2000s. For further details on generational birth years, see Figure 1. Millennials are the largest living generation in the United States, with over 69 million voting-age citizens (Fry 2016).

In their book *Millennials Rising*, Howe and Strauss (2000) attempted a large-scale life course analysis of the Millennial generation; however, being published in 2000, the book failed to take into account several major factors that served to disrupt their predictions, including September 11, 2001, the subsequent wars in the Middle East, and the Great Recession of 2008. Despite this, the work represents a profound optimism that starkly contrasts with books such as Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation* (2008), also describing Millennials. Howe and Strauss emphasize that Millennials will not continue the trends of selfishness, apathy, and risk-taking initiated by Generation X

(2000:6), but most importantly to this work, they analyze the social context of the childhood of Millennials.

**Figure 1. Birth Years for U.S. Generations**



Primarily, the 1990s was a child-friendly era: the social climate was positive and welcoming to children, initiating an era of the “protected child” very different from the social aversion to children present during the childhood of Generation X (Howe and Strauss 2000:33). Even the political sphere was marked by the presence of “kinderpolitics” (13), pro-child policies focused on improving the future of the United States “for the children.” At the social level, family values became increasingly important; as the birth rate rose, people emphasized the belief that children come first and consumer culture began creating products marketed specifically towards children (35-37). Parents began spending more time with their children, engaging in “attachment parenting” (125) defined by close supervision and involvement in the child’s education (147).

As a result of these parenting practices, Millennials generally have close relationships with their parents, particularly daughters with their mothers (186-7), and an acceptance of and trust in

authority figures. Additionally, Millennials are far more academically focused than previous generations, spending more time on homework, extracurricular activities, and advanced classes. As the demands on young people rose, their free time diminished, resulting in a generation accustomed to academic pressure, rigid structure, and “vertical growth” (criticized by Byock [2015]). Despite the creation of a youth culture for Millennials, Howe and Strauss also predicted that Millennials will reject this culture and will engage in a grassroots version of culture creation (2000:19). In essence, the book describes Millennials as achievement-oriented, technologically adept, sheltered, confident, pressured, community-oriented, healthy, and well-cared for.

Although beginning his piece in TIME Magazine with the bitter criticism previously cited, Joel Stein (2013) concludes the article by saying about Millennials:

They’re earnest and optimistic. They embrace the system. They are pragmatic idealists, tinkerers more than dreamers, life hackers... They want constant approval—they post photos from the dressing room as they try on clothes. They have a massive fear of missing out and have an acronym for everything (including FOMO) ...they don’t identify with big institutions...They want new experiences, which are more important to them than material goods. They are cool and reserved and not all that passionate. They are informed but inactive...They’re financially responsible; although student loans have hit record highs, they have less household and credit-card debt than any previous generation on record—which, admittedly, isn’t that hard when you’re living at home and using your parents’ credit card.

Beyond this, however, he states that Millennials are “the last large birth grouping that will be easy to generalize about” (Stein 2013). In contrast, I argue that prior generalizations have failed to take into account the vast diversity of this generation and the voices of Millennials themselves. Growing up in a child-centered culture, Millennials were not presented the opportunity to define their own generation and continue to struggle to do so; this thesis attempts to provide a small platform for self-definition.

### *Mental Health and Millennials*

A body of relevant literature regarding Millennials deals with the “mental health crisis” in this generation. The mental health crisis as a social problem is based on the rising suicide rates

among young adults and the increasing number of college and university students seeking psychological care for anxiety and depression (Kruisselbrink Flatt 2013). Evidence does suggest “large increases in mental health issues among young people in Western nations between the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 1990s” (Twenge 2011), but conclusions regarding causality are more difficult to establish. Twenge emphasizes that generational changes have led to distinct cultural shifts causing this problem. From a psychological perspective, “the cultural environment during childhood plays an especially important role in shaping lifelong susceptibility to anxiety” (Twenge 2011:470), and so Millennials are experiencing a “disconnect between expectations and reality—young people were told ‘you can be anything you want to be’ and ‘you are special’ and then found that reality was not quite so easy” (470). This disconnect can crush the perfectionism of Millennials and lead to psychological and emotional fragility (470), increasing susceptibility to anxiety and depression. Kruisselbrink Flatt (2013) also comments that the academic pressure Millennials face plays a key role in emotional instability; a childhood in a competitive environment with strong parental pressure may have resulted in an inability to cope with failure. She also notes that the increasing diversity of college students may add some anxiety to minority students or students of lower socioeconomic status in terms of the social and financial burdens of college life, again placing prevalence on the role of intersectionality in understanding the anxieties of a generation.

At a broader level, Twenge et al. (2012) looked at the value system of Millennials and found that this generation has less concern for others than do preceding generations and values extrinsic life goals (Twenge et al. 2012:1054). This construction of Millennials fits with the achievement-oriented nature of the generation, described by Howe and Strauss (2000), Byock (2015), and Stein (2013). Twenge et al. comment that emphasis on extrinsic values over intrinsic values correlates with distress and poorer psychological well-being, creating a possibility for mental health problems (2012:1058). Taking a life course perspective, Robinson et al. (2013) write that the transition

between adolescence and adulthood is a high-risk period for the onset of mental illness (28). They describe the coexistence of anxiety and depression in modern young adults as the result of a dichotomy between endings and beginnings (35). As Millennials leave adolescence, they experience loss, resulting in depression; as they begin adulthood, they experience uncertainty, resulting in anxiety (35).

The connection between modernity theory and mental illness is not completely absent from the sociological canon. Liah Greenfeld, in her book *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience* (2013), argues that the reflexive individualism of modernity leads to madness, emphasizing that “madness is modern” (Cushman 2015:59). While her point that the fractured nature of modernity has extended into the cognitive processes of modern individuals, thereby leading to mental health problems, holds weight when considering the effect of modernity on anxiety, Greenfeld goes so far as to say that diseases such as schizophrenia are not biological but are purely dependent on the cognitive influences of modernity. While emphasizing the sociocultural factors leading to anxiety and insecurity in the Millennial generation, this thesis also attempts to understand how Millennials themselves delineate between their own anxiety, worry, insecurity, and fear and diagnosed mental illnesses. The modern therapeutic culture allows many young people to feel comfortable using terms related to mental illness while still separating their personal conception, the medical definition, and the social stigma surrounding diagnosed mental illness.

Although this thesis attempts to explain social and systemic (rather than psychological) factors leading to anxiety, insecurity, and depression in the Millennial generation, caution is requisite when generalizing emotional uncertainty to an entire generation. In his analysis of anxiety theory, Alan Hunt underscores the layering of social anxieties in general descriptions of “socio-historical phenomena as responses generated by social change” (Hunt 1999). However, he cautions that social anxieties do not always represent a conglomerate of individual anxieties, but rather provide for ease

of labeling in that social anxiety brings together the fears and worries of individuals onto a specific target. In this way, the inclusion of diverse perspectives is increasingly important in the study of modernity, and while this work attempts to underscore some of the central anxieties of modern young people, generalizations are made within the limitations of the study.

## **Conclusion**

Modernity, amidst all its complexity, represents the breakdown of traditional social structures, and sociological modernity theory seeks to understand the sociocultural consequences of this de-traditionalization. Modernization, however, brings with it a “general climate of uncertainty” due to the precariousness of ontological security and trust in an unstable environment (Giddens 1991:185). This uncertainty is experienced through anxiety as both an individual and social phenomenon. At the individual level, people living in modernity must develop new pathways of identity formation. Without traditional structures, individuals must engage in reflexivity with their social context to define themselves amidst myriad choices. In this way, subjectivity becomes dependent on social context, but identity formation is infiltrated by modern anxieties, resulting in a fragile dichotomy between ontological security and self-identity. The modern focus on self-identity and subjectivity leads to a therapeutic culture that emphasizes and prioritizes emotions and mental health. Modern society serves as a mirror into the subjective (Lasch 1979), a characteristic particularly exacerbated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the omnipresence of social media and the tendency for even “average” individuals to be constantly on display, which further deepens the modern tendency towards self-centeredness.

Generational theory also plays an important yet understated role in modernity. Because generations are shaped by their historical context, generations that exist within modernity will be affected by the social and historical changes that accompany modernization. Of particular importance is the transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood, a stage of life that leads to

anxiety and uncertainty for any generation. The transitional concerns and the manner through which they are experienced are unique to each generation dependent upon the sociohistorical context of that transitional period. Termed emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000), this life stage is marked by anxiety-inducing instability and fluidity. As a result, emerging adulthood is a time of fragility and identity confusion: young people are confronted with an abundance of choice regarding their next steps, and must develop an identity and establish themselves as adults on a subjective level rather than through traditional, material pathways.

Emerging adulthood is a primarily subjective stage of life, which acutely reflects the modern importance of emotions and identity-formation because of the crisis-prone nature of this age. Millennials make up the generation that is presently undergoing the stage of emerging adulthood (the term was invented to describe them specifically). The conflation of modernity-related anxieties with the uncertainties of coming of age have led to the so-called “mental health crisis” in the Millennial generation. Young people are experiencing disconnect between their hopeful expectations for the future and the reality of adulthood, and as a result of the combined fragility of coming of age and in modernity are perhaps more susceptible to anxiety and depression. The understanding of Millennials as existing at a crossroads has driven this thesis, which attempts to analyze the anxieties and insecurities of members of this generation and the social factors that exacerbate these uncertainties.

## METHODS

### **A Note On Qualitative Methodology**

While there are clear benefits to a quantitative analysis of the demographic aspects of generational and social change, this thesis takes a qualitative approach. Focusing on a smaller sample of individuals enables qualitative research to delve more deeply into the questions being asked. By

engaging in what Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) term “reality reconstruction,” the interviews used in this study represent detailed mirrors into the subjectivities of the sampled individuals. Multiple themes could be studied in depth, respondents could be pushed to consider the social phenomena behind their thoughts, behaviors, and actions, and connections could be made even within data collection rather than being limited to the isolated realm of data analysis. Building on Max Weber’s theory of *Verstehen*, qualitative research utilizes the interpretive and decision-making processes of individuals to form sociological theories (Schwartz and Jacobs 1979). As qualitative researchers, our role is to build from the subjective to the objective by finding social meaning within the individual and their life experiences. Qualitative research introduces an important human component to sociological inquiry by looking at smaller groups of people at the micro-level, a definitively different approach from skimming the surface of a larger subset of the population.

The theoretical approach described in the previous section is particularly well-suited for qualitative methodology. Both modernity theories and generational theories present visions of a society in which large-scale social transformations and changes are felt at a subjective, individual level. Parallel to structural transformations, modernity is accompanied by changes in the ways in which human beings shape their identity. Although it has an important social component, identity is a primarily subjective experience, and so societal changes in processes of identity formation have consequences at the individual level. The broad social transformations that result from the intersection of modernity and generational theory, then, are represented within the subjective experiences of all modern young people, albeit with some variation dependent upon specific social context, gender, class, race, or other identity factors. The mirrored and subjective nature of this research reflects Lasch’s vision of a mirrored modern society. For this reason, a micro-level analysis allows for a deeper understanding of human subjectivity, and despite the small sample size the

thoughts outlined by these few respondents are conceptually relevant to social changes occurring on a broader scale.

Specifically regarding the Millennial generation, qualitative study is important for this demographic due to the prevalence of popular culture literature regarding Millennials. Writing about (and criticizing) Millennials has become a cultural hobby but often lacks analytical sophistication. A methodology adapted to understand the subjectivity of young people gives a voice to first-person perspectives. This thesis engages in “grounded research” in which concepts and thematic elements were directly built upon the data itself. Rather than beginning with specific hypotheses and assumptions, I allowed the interview process to determine my findings. In this way, qualitative study leaves room for the intricacies of human nature, and allows researchers to confront and adapt generalizations applied to broad social groups to develop a complex *Verstehen* and nuanced sociological theory grounded in actual data.

### **Sample**

To collect a sample for this study, I relied on personal networks and social media. My sample consisted of 25 young adults between the ages of 17 and 27, with an average age of 21. I personally recruited seven respondents, five respondents replied to my various Facebook posts requesting interview participants, and 13 respondents were referred to my study by someone that knows me personally. All of the respondents experienced all or most of their childhood in California. All but two grew up in Northern California, and eight were living or attending school outside of California. Four had either not attended college or had completed some community college, two were planning on attending college in the next two years, six were college graduates (two of whom had either a Masters or a professional degree), and the remainder were currently attending college. All respondents could be categorized as middle class, upper middle class, or upper class. Various other traits of the sample are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample

| <b>Gender</b>              |    |
|----------------------------|----|
| Female                     | 17 |
| Male                       | 8  |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b>      |    |
| White                      | 19 |
| Asian/South Asian          | 3  |
| Mixed Race (Asian & White) | 2  |
| Hispanic/Latino            | 1  |
| <b>Hometown Region</b>     |    |
| <i>Northern California</i> | 23 |
| Central Valley             | 1  |
| Silicon Valley             | 13 |
| Central Coast              | 9  |
| <i>Southern California</i> | 2  |

The greatest problem in selecting a sample for this study was response bias: at times it was difficult to recruit participants, which is why I found myself drawing on social networks. Of the 15 individuals in the sample I knew personally, two were close friends, four were family friends, two attend Wellesley, and one was a relative.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews took place between March and August 2016. Four were conducted over the phone, and the rest were conducted in person at a location chosen by the respondent. One interview was not fully completed due to time constraints, but the completed portion has been included in analysis. I informed each participant of the confidentiality of their responses and received verbal consent regarding participation and to record the interview. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours and were semi-structured and open-ended. Questions were developed through exposure to relevant literature and designed to best answer my initial research questions. The interviews covered the respondents' demographic information, generational identity, childhood,

anxieties, fears, social media use, insecurities, and mental illness. The full interview schedule is attached as Appendix A.

## **Analysis**

Each interview was fully transcribed. I personally transcribed six of the interviews, nine were transcribed by a professional transcription service, and 10 were transcribed by paid student transcribers. Major thematic elements were noted throughout the data collection process and in deep readings of several of the transcriptions. Relevant literature also framed the development of themes. Each interview was initially coded along main ideas such as social media use, money, anxieties, social networks, competition, emotions, and “being an adult.” Several main ideas were selected to be addressed in each of the subsequent four chapters. Once delineated by chapter, the data was further divided into more specific thematic elements and then organized to provide a skeletal structure for each portion of the analysis. Interview responses are both paraphrased and quoted directly and all identifying information has been changed to protect the identity of the respondent while preserving relevant background.

## **Limitations**

While an important tool for understanding the subjective component of social change, qualitative study inevitably has inherent limitations to generalizability due to the small sample size and its potential lack of heterogeneity. This sample is primarily women, not by design but because those willing to participate were most often women and because my social network primarily consists of women. While there was some variation in levels of education, all of the respondents grew up in a middle class, upper middle class, or upper class household. Also not by design, most of the respondents were white. Because of the importance of multiple identity factors, generalizations made in this study may only be applicable to the modal type of individuals represented in this sample: white, middle-class, young people. Some observations based on intersectional identity

factors will be noted throughout this thesis. Although by design, the sample also consisted only of individuals from California, and so findings of this study may not apply to young adults who did not grow up in this region. Many times the respondents mentioned how their social context or personal characteristics influenced the way they see the world, and this will also be addressed throughout. However, modernity and generational theory indicate that broad social changes affect all individuals regardless of other identity factors, and the qualitative nature of this study allows for generalization regarding the generational consciousness, identity formation, anxieties, and insecurities of modern young people.

Finally, as a young, upper middle class, white woman from California, I must note my own similarity to the sample population. While this was not intentional, given the restrictions and difficulties of recruiting interview participants outside of a formal research context it is not surprising. My initial desire to pursue the research questions that drove this study stemmed from personal experience. Beyond the research idea and the sample selection, I have taken care to not bring my own perspectives into my analysis.

## CHAPTER 2. WHO ARE MILLENNIALS?: GENERATIONAL IDENTITY

Conducting a Google search of the term “Millennials” will produce approximately 38 million results, yet despite this high number there is relatively little consensus – even among Millennials themselves – regarding what the Millennial generation actually constitutes. Most respondents, when asked what the term Millennial means to them, expressed amusement, frustration, or apathy. In contrast to Alwin and McCammon’s (2003) definition of a generation as sharing a “self-conscious identity,” the reactions of the respondents seemed to demonstrate a lack of intrinsic generational consciousness, departing from the identity component required to establish a cohort as a generation. However, it is important to note that Millennials do not completely lack generational identity; rather, their identity as a generation has been complicated by an upbringing in high modernity. This chapter aims to outline modern young adults’ generational self-definition, and highlights two primary themes to demonstrate the impact of modernity on the life course and generational structure of Millennials. The first is that Millennials embody the reflexivity of modernity, and understand themselves and their generation as integrated with specific social contexts. The second is the heterogeneity, diversity, and individualism of this generation, reflecting key ideologies of modernity.

### MILLENNIAL AS AN UNWANTED LABEL

#### **Hesitant Self-Identification**

When people talk about Millennials I’m like, “Yes, you’re talking about me.” But I wouldn’t necessarily call myself or refer to myself as a Millennial (Isabel, age 19).

Although often told that they are Millennials, modern young people are far more hesitant to identify themselves using the term. This hesitancy stems partly from a rejection of generational boundaries and partly from a feeling that the word Millennial is not their own but one that has been assigned to them. On the one hand, respondents like Isabel rejected the idea of generational

boundaries: “I don’t know if I buy into the whole generational thing. It probably makes sense to a certain extent to generalize growing up during a certain time, but putting any definitive boundaries on that I feel is unnecessary.” On the other hand, many young people described a lack of self-identification with the specific term Millennial. Aditi, a 21-year-old from Southern California, laughed off the term, saying “I don’t ever actually identify with the word ... it’s just a joke to me,” while Catherine (20) elaborated:

I guess that is the cohort that I’m in, but I don’t self-identify as a Millennial, and so it’s sort of this outside thing that has been imposed on me. I mean, I am. I don’t reject that, but that’s not something that I care about, that isn’t a meaningful part of my identity as much as those things [other identity factors such as woman, student, 20-year-old, from Silicon Valley] that I just said were.

Ironically, Millennials’ hesitancy to accept boundaries and labels serves as a defining characteristic of the generation as a whole.

When asked to define what the term means, the modal definition used age ranges and numbers, including the group of individuals between 18 and 30, those born between the mid-1980s and 2000, and those who experienced their formative years of development around the turn of the millennium. Having established this definition, many respondents begrudgingly accepted that they were Millennials, while still underscoring their lack of self-identification. Aaron, a 25-year-old from the Central Coast, represented this idea: “I understand that I’m in the age range of what people consider Millennials. I don’t mind other people saying it, but it’s not something I would brag about or label myself or profess in any way.” Evident in Lauren’s (24) comment, “I don’t know what the true definition of being a Millennial is, but I’ve heard people say that I am, so therefore I must be,” disassociation with the term Millennial is not an active decision to reject the term. Rather, respondents seemed to reluctantly accept the label without either fully denying or embracing it.

However, one respondent did embrace the term Millennial. Samantha, a 20-year-old from Silicon Valley, said:

I think I'm pretty much as Millennial as it gets at this point just because of the mix of social media and growing up around here and going to a liberal arts school ... working in tech and going to San Francisco all the time and loving the food trends, getting really deeply into random stuff. I think that's a very Millennial-y thing. I would definitely consider myself a Millennial.

Her acceptance of the term was conditional on its breadth and generality. She went on to say that

I think it's kind of a broad term, and I think there are a lot of sub-definitions of it that I identify with and so there are enough where I can comfortably say that I am a Millennial ... I'm okay under this big umbrella term.

Because most felt that the label Millennial was an over-generalization of the diversity of their generation, they were able to accept it as a blanket term and not as an indication of any particular trait or characteristic.

### **Rejecting Imposed Definitions**

When discussing generational identity with young adults, it is the term "Millennial" that causes the most frustration. Most of the respondents identified with other young people and with modern youth culture. They begrudgingly accepted that they were "technically" a Millennial, but rejected the social connotations of that label. Their frustration and confusion with this term primarily stems from the fact that it is a label given to this generation by older adults. As criticism of younger generations from older generations is a common social phenomenon, it is understandable that the connotations of "Millennial" are primarily negative. The negative connotations of the term are also influential in adding to generational resentment (Feuer 1969). Jenny, a 25-year-old from the Central Coast, emphasized that the term Millennial signifies "entitled, and lazy, and expect success without working hard. But I feel like that doesn't describe me and a lot of people, it's just another generalization." Samantha added that "just stereotypically we're very whiny and self-absorbed, so I don't want to say I'm whiny and self-absorbed because no one wants to identify with the negative traits ... I don't think that we're all like that. We're a very dynamic group of people." Jenny and Samantha's comments demonstrate the extent to which Millennials' generational identity is also

dialectically formed in relation to the assessments and opinions of older generations. Just as Millennials reject the term because it was imposed onto them, they understand themselves either in accordance with or in contrast to the opinions of older adults.

Many other respondents also rejected the term Millennial because they saw it as a negative generalization that cannot capture the nuances and variation of an entire generation. As Aditi emphasized, “you can’t encompass such a diverse culture all into one thing.” She went on to describe how older generations use generalizations regarding Millennials in marketing and political strategies to serve their own purpose: “I think a lot of people who are not Millennials use it as a political tool, or a social tool, to understand or generalize people that they need something from, like votes or things like that.” Her cynical perspective on the term Millennial reflects a rejection of the overgeneralizations used by critics of the generation such as Joel Stein (2013) in favor of an emphasis on diversity.

A second common reason for dismissal of the term Millennial is the belief that the term is a criticism due to its frequent use in conjunction with descriptors such as lazy, entitled, spoiled, and sheltered. Lisa, a 17-year-old from Silicon Valley, stated “I think the media generally portrays it [Millennials] as very negative. I think the way that someone described it to me was that Millennials are Lena Dunham girls. People who are living off of their parents, really quite spoiled.” Similarly, Jacqueline, an 18-year-old from the Central Coast, said “being a Millennial, people just think you’re like, noses in your phone all day.” She went on to say,

As a whole it is stereotyped negatively. It’s where people my age, they don’t know what it means to be respectful, to respect older people and have common sense, that’s how I feel it’s always seen. It’s just like, oh, young and ignorant and arrogant... I feel like that’s really what my age group has come to represent in the eyes of older people.

Although respondents mostly admitted that “to be a Millennial is just kind of what you are” (Casey, 25), they were frustrated with the barrage of criticism they felt from the rest of society. Casey emphasized that the negative portrayal of Millennials has led to intergenerational resentment: while

Millennials are scapegoated for social change, they criticize the older generation for hindering progress.

An opinion held by several respondents was that Millennials often did embody some of the negative stereotypes, but that these characteristics should not be criticized or seen negatively. Rather, their differences from older generations could be attributed to the different social context in which they grew up. Thomas, a 21-year-old from Silicon Valley, commented that many of the criticisms are unfounded: “I think there are a lot of false conceptions about the Millennial generation, about their work ethic or their values not aligning properly with the rest of America.” Respondents also emphasized that because they are a younger generation, the criticisms from older generations are often about their being young. Josh, a 19-year-old from Silicon Valley, commented: “[the term] is used as silly Millennial. Silly Millennial, they’ve only been here 20 years, they don’t know how the world works.” While highlighting how the modern generation of youth is merely different from older generations, rather than worse or better, Samantha added, “we’ve just lived through the 90s and now. We’re still very new.”

That Millennials are a generation of youth, which makes them an easy target for criticism, inevitably leads to the type of generational resentment described by Eisenstadt (1956) and Feuer (1969). Feuer analyzes how young generations become frustrated with a society controlled by older generations; Millennials expressed frustration that their negatively stereotyped generational definition has been assigned to them by older members of society. While the outside perspective remains critical, young adults such as Catherine see positive aspects of their generation: “I do care about being young and think that young people and people our age are doing a lot of cool things and should be taken more seriously than we are, especially young women and girls are not taken seriously.” As these young adults come of age, they will obtain further power to reject these

stereotypes and to establish themselves in society. Nevertheless, in the interim that frustration remains.

When confronted with the term Millennial, respondents accepted that they were a part of the generation but expressed their frustration with the criticism implicit in that description. While they did not completely reject the characteristics assigned to Millennials, they insisted that the implications of these traits are not as negative as they have been previously understood. By rejecting boundaries and definitions, Millennials also understood themselves through the frame of reference provided by older generations. However, many of the young people expressed a wish for the social image of their generation held by others to go beyond the stereotype and reflect the diversity they see in themselves.

#### UNDERSTANDING GENERATIONS AS SOCIALLY DEFINED

Reflecting Erikson (1968) and Giddens's (1991) analyses of identity as simultaneously subjective and social, Millennials appear to think of their identity as a reflexive project, one dependent on their particular social contexts. Their understanding of their generation is constructed relevant to their sociocultural surroundings. Millennials are who they are because they were raised in a unique social context and with a specific parenting style. Likewise, respondents described how each generation is different because of its own social context. As a means of rejecting criticisms of their own generation, young people emphasized that these differences do not lead to any one generation to be worse or better. Rather, the historical events that occurred in the lifetime of each generation – particularly events occurring during youth – lead each generation to be simultaneously the same as and unique from others. This nuanced way of thinking aligns with sociological life course theory (see Alwin and McCammon 2003).

#### **Millennials as the Children of Modernity**

When asked what makes their generation unique, nearly all of the respondents emphasized that growing up in a modern social context has affected Millennials' behavior and value system. Josh elaborated:

I think they themselves [Millennials] are not unique, I think it's their environment that makes them unique. Humans have never lived in a time of this exact technological advancement. It's all relative, I mean. I'm sure it was totally crazy when fire became a thing. I'm sure it was totally crazy when iron tools replaced stone tools. It's all relative. The exact technology wasn't the same, but for every generation the exact technology of that time, the exact time they lived in had been so completely different than the time before. I think that in their uniqueness, in the uniqueness of Millennials, they are the same as everyone else. The exact situation is different, but in the comparisons to past generations they are similar if not the same.

His understanding of Millennials as only being unique because the time in which they grew up is unique represents an understanding of social life as reflexive. Modern young adults, rather than emphasizing any conscious decision to behave a certain way, appear to understand that they are who they are because of their environment. Isabel commented, "I think ultimately people are just people. But the way that we've grown up has obviously affected those experiences and nobody else is going to have the same experiences."

Respondents emphasized that the parenting style they experienced as children also helped shape their generation, primarily because parents in the 1990s overwhelmingly emphasized their role as a safety net for their offspring. While this will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis (see Chapter 5), it is important to mention the relevance of parental attitudes toward children when understanding how the Millennial generation has become a product of its environment. As Howe and Strauss (2000) analyzed in their work on Millennials, the 1990s was the era of the "protected child." Importantly, this means that middle-class parents of Millennials saw their role as protectors: children were given the opportunity for exploration without the pressure of self-sufficiency. Michael, a 19-year-old from Silicon Valley, described this phenomenon:

I mean, the kind of parenting that existed for most of that time period was much more focused on an extended adolescence, where you're still pretty much a kid until you're 23, 24.

Because your parents still pay for everything, you don't really have to worry about yourself, you just have to worry about if you're going to college, getting through college, doing your best, having a good time. After college, worried about getting a job, but your parents will still subsidize your life so you don't have to live in a shack. Like, just a lot more support than I feel like people have ever gotten before, partially because of the economic situation for most of the time that Millennials have been coming into the work force, but also just because of the style of parenting that's much more focused on nurturing and things like that.

Casey also mentioned this protective parenting style: “I think older generations have somewhat tried to make life easier for Millennials in certain ways... I think there's kind of that mentality of giving more to your children than you feel like you had.” Both of these respondents, as well as others, emphasized that their parents’ attitudes affected their development during childhood. As a modern generation, Millennials embody Giddens’s (1991) emphasis on the reflexivity of modernity. Not only does their generational development and identity formation reflect this reflexivity, but they also appear to be acutely self-aware of the role their social context has played in their development. Lasch’s (1979) metaphor of modernity as a mirror is personified in Millennials, who are comfortable acknowledging the influential role of social and historical framework towards the formation of their subjective identity.

### **Generations as “Just Different”**

After asking them to define their generation, I asked respondents whether Millennials are worse or better than older generations.<sup>3</sup> Some individuals, addressed later in this chapter, responded that Millennials were definitively worse, but the overwhelming majority used the phrase “just different” in their responses. Citing differences in social contexts, many young adults believed that because differences are caused by the world being different it is impossible to rank generations as better or worse. Megan, a 24-year-old from Southern California, stated: “it’s the kind of thing where you can’t compare because the world changes and there are things that are better about the world

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<sup>3</sup> The exact question wording was as follows: “How do Millennials/members of your generation compare to members of older generations? Worse? Better?” (see Appendix A).

now, and there are things about the world that are worse. ... You know, it's just the world is different.”

This perspective was also used defensively regarding criticisms of Millennials as a “worse” generation. Both Antonio and Casey addressed this by commenting that each generation has its faults:

I feel we're totally different. I don't think we are worse or better than them... I feel we're just different. We obviously grew up in different eras and ... I feel we're just different people. A lot of them blame us for not paying for our own college, but it's expensive. I can see a lot of that thing is happening more. They are like, "Well, we worked then. We paid for our own college." Then we blame them for messing up the economy. But it's everybody's fault. It's not one specific group. (Antonio, 22)

I think that each generation can blame another generation for something. ... I think they're all just different. I mean it's just the times and the atmosphere that you grow up in. The environment that you get lends itself towards your upbringing being different and it's constantly changing the world and society and tech and everything. It's all changing so I think that we're all just kind of catching up. (Casey, 25)

Respondents were able to use their knowledge of individuals and generations as socially defined to deflect the criticism they felt was aimed at them by other members of society. As a modern form of generational resentment (Feuer 1969), this perspective criticizes older generations not for their behavior but rather for their lack of understanding that all behavior is a result of social context.

Confronting attitudes towards Millennials, Catherine summarized: “every new generation ... thinks it is super, super special and the other generations think it’s terrible in new special ways, and I don’t think that’s particularly true. I think we’re all pretty similar and have pretty similar hopes and fears.”

This similarity was seen as particularly important in reference to Millennials’ status as the current generation of youth. Respondents mostly agreed that being young is similar regardless of one’s generation. Following up on his earlier statement, Josh added:

I think that the Baby Boomer generation and Generation X probably suffered through a similar thing. When they were young and feeling like the world is in their hands, people were like, “Well slow down, you don’t know how this all works, you’re just young people.” That’s how I kind of think the Millennial generation is now, and that in 20 years when there’s whatever is next, Generation Z or something like that, I think that against our greatest

efforts those same prejudices will be pushed on the next generation... Right now the meaning of Millennial is young people, and young people to old people in general are just wild and just want to change everything.

Priya, a 22-year-old from Silicon Valley, made a similar comment:

When the Baby Boomers were young, they were also a very revolutionary generation but now they look at how we're different from them and they see it as a bad thing. Maybe not remembering how their parents saw their generation as very lost and very anti-authoritarian and stuff like that. Same with Generation X. ... I think it's just every generation is different from the one before it, but it doesn't ever mean they're better or worse, they're just different. There are different conditions when you're growing up.

Although being young is similar for all generations, life course and generational theorists agree that the social context during youth is particularly important in the process of identity development. Respondents also seemed to grasp this concept. They highlighted differences between themselves and their parents by citing the different worlds in which they were raised. Jacqueline stated, “we were just raised differently. My mom and dad were raised in a time where ... the world was kind of a different place.” Respondents who were children of immigrants were particularly observant of how differences between themselves and their parents could be attributed to the environments of their youth. Victoria, a 24-year-old from Silicon Valley, admitted that both her and her parents were forced to “balance two cultures and identities” as a result of being multiracial, but emphasized that her parents were presented with more objective obstacles. She stated, “my parents grew up in a war-torn country. They were more worried about their next meal or how they’ll get to America, whether they’re going to pass their interview process, whether they had TB (tuberculosis) in that screening ... whereas I was worried about my AP (Advanced Placement) scores at that age.” The “totally different mindsets” of herself and her parents were similar to those expressed by Antonio, another child of immigrants. Their stories indicate on a more dramatic level the profound effect of social and historical context on differentiating each generation. Millennials’ tendency to define themselves and others socially and reflexively indicates the extent to which they are a modern generation.

## UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIALS: A SELF-DEFINITION

Although their lack of association with the term Millennial could imply that modern youth also lack generational consciousness, most of the respondents shared similar notions of how to define their generation. Many of these notions centered on a defiance of the possibility of defining the Millennial generation. Again, ironically, Millennials' idea that their generation is impossible to define may indicate a definitional consensus and type of generational consciousness. Beyond negating the possibility of strict generational boundaries, Millennials generally agreed on certain generational characteristics. In conjunction with their understanding of the effect of social context on the formation of a generation, most respondents saw Millennials as having been raised with technology. Paralleling the findings of Howe and Strauss (2000), they saw their generation as competitive and invested in education. Politically, Millennials are socially liberal and accepting, proponents of social change, and idealistic, sometimes at the expense of realism. As an aspect of their liberalness and a result of their emphasis on social context, many respondents either stated directly or hinted at the idea that their generation was acutely aware of the specific structural realities that affected their life chances, whether negatively through social barriers or positively through privilege. Finally, in contrast to their idealism, many respondents emphasized the effect of a climate of fear on their life perspectives.

### **Technology**

Technological advancement was repeatedly cited as the primary factor contributing to the establishment of Millennials as a unique generation. Several respondents referred to the impact that a social context focused on technology has had on young people. Michael commented, "I think it just so happened that a lot of really big societal changes occurred – because of the Internet and technology and lots of other things – that it put us in a unique position." This era of rapid change

has also created a dividing line between older and younger generations. David, a 27-year-old from the Central Coast, emphasized that Millennials are accustomed to adapting to change because they were raised in a fluid social environment: “a lot has happened in a short time ... that effectively changes the world in such a way that it makes it harder for people who grew up in times not like this to relate and change with the times.” Other, older generations, having less experience with adaptation, are perhaps unable to adjust as quickly as modern young people, potentially leading to division and animosity between the generations.

Beyond separating Millennials from their predecessors, technology has increased accessibility and made communication easier. Young people often see this as positive, but acknowledge that online communication has led to less face-to-face contact, a phenomenon that older generations are quick to criticize. Kayla, a 20-year-old from the Central Coast, echoed these criticisms: “I just think that we’re disconnected from life ... everything is so controlled by technology and nothing seems as real anymore to Millennials.” Many respondents acknowledged a dichotomy between connection and disconnection as a result of an upbringing with technology. Victoria described this disconnect as lonely, and Megan commented,

I think other people see it [this generation] as disconnected from their surroundings, which definitely makes sense because technology is so readily available. You do have a lot more access to people, but it’s in a different way... I think globalization and access to more people and more things is good, but it makes it harder because you have more options, and when you have more options it’s harder to choose. So I don’t know if it’s necessarily good or bad.

Whether accessibility and global communication are positive or negative, they have affected the personality development of Millennials. Respondents believed that being brought up surrounded by technology has caused Millennials to appreciate and accept modern conveniences and to desire instant gratification. Ashley, a 20-year-old from Northern California, elaborated on this subject: “I think being a Millennial incorporates a different view of society around you, and how you view technology and how you use it. It’s all about becoming more modern ... we expect things faster; we

go after things faster using technology.” Most of the young people interviewed emphasized that being brought up with technology is beneficial. Some respondents cited having to teach their parents about new technologies or having an advantage in the job market due to their familiarity with modern advancements.

Another positive aspect of a technological childhood, and perhaps the rationale behind why Millennials are comfortable with reflexive notions of identity, is that exposure to technology leads to self-awareness. Samantha noted,

We’re a product of technology, we’re a product of social-networking and that’s probably what changed our generation the most. People think that we’re so selfish, but I don’t think that’s necessarily true. I think it’s because social-networking became so rampant and people got into it and naturally you just post about yourself and your life. I think we’re very self-involved. We’re also very self-aware and we care a lot about issues.

This thought simultaneously acknowledges criticisms of Millennials as the “Me, Me, Me Generation” (Stein 2013) while indicating the importance of self-awareness as a tool for social awareness.

Becoming accustomed to seeing their lives mediated through a screen has given Millennials a meta-perspective on their own existence, one that allows them to see the bigger picture. As part of this, and referring to generational differences, many respondents believed that younger generations will be even more focused on technology. Jacqueline described how her early childhood remained technology-free, a contrast from children born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a result, she believes that today’s young adults had “a more authentic upbringing, more natural than now, being raised in all the technology and all the things that come with that.” Importantly, while Millennials define their generation in relation to advancements in technology that accompanied their upbringing, they have already begun to distance themselves from subsequent generations, citing technology as a divisive element.

### **Education and Pressure to Succeed**

As Thomas stated directly, “a lot of Millennials are highly educated; they were raised with the goal of going to college and being able to have a successful career.” Because Millennials are currently in the life stage of attending school, education – particularly higher education – is an important element when defining this generation. Surveys conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles (HERI) indicate that, over the past 50 years, college students’ achievement-based goals have sharply increased, demonstrating that modern young people value academic achievement more than did their predecessors (Eagan et al. 2016). Some respondents stressed that education outside the classroom, such as online discourse about social and political issues, has also led to informed young people.

Formal education, although important, was often seen as a source of stress. Lisa reflected this when she said, “People have gotten way more intense about education than they used to be.” The intensity felt by Millennials stems from academic pressure, both in high school and in college, and competition regarding college acceptances and job acquisition and can often have a negative impact on emotional health (Eagan et al. 2016). Thomas stated: “The world has gotten a lot more competitive in a lot of arenas, like getting into colleges, getting good jobs at good companies.” Lisa went on to say, “I feel like people my age and people older than me are very intense about high school, college, grad school... The age group of 18 to 28, I’d say, is very intense about getting into the workforce, getting stuff done as soon as possible, and having the highest level of education.” It is important to note, however, that not all of the respondents and not all Millennials are engaged in higher education. The four respondents who had either completed some community college or who had not participated in any form of higher education did not mention education as a defining factor of their generation, again stressing the importance of specific social context and intersectionality when creating a generational definition.

Other young people added that they felt pressured to succeed, although the source of this pressure was nebulous: “There is still more pressure on us to know what we’re doing and have everything figured out” (Catherine, 20). Anxiety about having one’s life “figured out” is indicative of the life stage presently occupied by Millennials, and stress about the future is exacerbated by young adults’ fear of failure. Byock (2015) analyzed this phenomenon, also described by Lauren: “I think because of social media, because of the Millennial attitude towards ‘I want this great thing but I don’t have smaller goals to getting there,’ when on the first try we don’t succeed, failure is very much seen as this negative thing.” Fear of failure and other anxieties regarding adulthood will be addressed in Chapter 3; as an initial understanding, entering adulthood brings many challenges that are an important component of Millennials’ self-definition. Partly due to their current life stage and partly due to an academically-focused childhood (Howe and Strauss 2000), Millennials see their generation as one that values education and success.

### **Liberalness**

Another central characteristic of Millennials – exacerbated in this study by the political climate of California – is that they are liberal and accepting of difference, more than previous generations. This description is reinforced by national survey findings that indicate an increase in progressive political views among modern college students compared to 50 years ago (Eagan et al. 2016). Lauren summarized, “the Millennial generation has this ‘it’s okay’ attitude about social things.” She went on to say,

I think that being a Millennial means that you are way more progressive than our parents have been. I think that we’re more open to people and things and experiences that are different than the ones we have had. More accepting, whether or not we understand someone who’s different or something else that they’ve experienced, there’s a level of “it doesn’t affect me, so I don’t care. It doesn’t affect me, so it’s okay.” In the Millennial generation there’s less of a stigma about “well, that’s not like me so that’s wrong.”

Millennials were described as accepting of same-sex or interracial marriage as well as other forms of difference. Antonio attributed this to growing up in a more diverse environment,<sup>4</sup> stating that “we just know how to be with other people and don’t know how to hate.” Kayla expressed optimism that the liberalness of Millennials will lead to the creation of a more accepting society, echoed by Antonio: “most of the Millennials want to change the world, they want to change everything right now. They want to make this country better and then make the world a better place.”

### *Proponents of Social Change*

Modern young adults were described as proponents of social change: respondents cited specific movements regarding feminism, sexuality, Black Lives Matter, and environmentalism. Their drive to make society better results in a passionate generation “working on changing the way our society is run” (Ashley, 20), a not uncommon characteristic of youth (Feuer 1969). Their passion about social change is accompanied by an awareness regarding consequences of behaviors. Michael understood his generation’s environmentalism as a belief that “we’re all going to die or we’re going to have to fix it.” Millennials, as “the first generation that’s actually cared about the environment,” maintain an awareness of how their economic and personal decisions could affect the world on a global scale. The global nature of Millennial activism can be attributed to their early exposure to the Internet and international networks, and social media has become a tool for change: “people are very active on social media in terms of trying to create change within the world” (Lisa, 17).

Priya described how Millennials care about social issues, and how this has made them demand better for themselves. To dispute the belief of older generations that Millennials are entitled, she added, “I think Millennials have a sense of, ‘No, I deserve better, I’m not going to put up with this.’” However, Samantha acknowledged that “Millennials are known to complain a lot, known to

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<sup>4</sup> The Bay Area, and California as a whole, is particularly diverse. This statement may not apply to Millennials raised in more homogenous contexts.

be hypercritical about things,” and that sometimes their passionate nature can expect too much change too soon. Josh also emphasized this tendency as impractical but an inevitable consequence of being young.

### *Idealism*

As a core component of their desire for change, Millennials are idealistic. This is simultaneously a product of being young and of growing up in an era of rapid change: change becomes normalized and expected. Ashley stated,

I think every generation, when they were younger they have that same kind of idealism ... So it's just that idealist passionate movements have had to be spurred by those who are younger and still have that open-mindedness, like we can actually make change, we can actually do something.

Samantha added that the idealism of youth inevitably leads to conflict with older generations, particularly in the political sphere:

I think that logic-over-passion is what sets older people apart from Millennials. We're excited about this change and we're now exposed to our own ability to become passionate about things and so we take advantage of that passion. We can vote now, and this is big, whereas older people have been voting for however many years and at this point they've heard enough opinions and they've come to their own conclusions about what they support and what they don't support. The decisions they make will probably be more sound and more informed through life, whereas ours are probably more like "This is a problem, we need to change it right now." They probably see it as more of a "things take gradual time and we need to wait until everything happens, and it will happen, but you just kind of need to come down and let it run its course."

The idea that Millennials do not understand that change takes time was reflected by multiple respondents. Josh attributed it to a self-righteous attitude while Ashley believed that young people were blinded by their passion and idealism. Although seen as primarily positive because it has the power to initiate wide scale change for the better, the idealism of Millennials was also described as a dividing element between them and older generations.

### **Awareness of Structural Realities**

In unpacking the generational identity of Millennials, one core aspect has reappeared again and again: Millennials are a generation that sees social context as highly important. Whether they are using it to explain how they became the way they are or describing a desire to make the world better, modern young adults are acutely aware of the world around them. Reflexive engagement with their social and cultural surroundings has led to an awareness of the economic and structural realities that affect their present and future. Several respondents believed that other generations lack this awareness. Lisa described how she hears older family members “saying things like, ‘College isn't super important’ and ‘Don't worry about debt,’” a stark difference from the opinions of young adults such as Isabel, who mentioned that financial concerns have caused her to lower her expectations for the future. Victoria described student debt as an important economic reality for Millennials, leading to “financial obligations that previous generations might not have [had].” Economic pressure, particularly when combined with academic and work responsibilities, is a structural reality that many young adults cannot escape.

In addition to being aware of challenges, Millennials also understand structural components of their lives that help them to succeed, referred to as “privilege.” Michael describes this as, once again, different from older generations:

I think in older generations there's more of a do-it-yourself, pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality, which really just isn't the case at all, wasn't the case, never really was the case. [In the Millennial generation] I think there's more acknowledgement of the factors of white privilege, financial privilege, straight privilege, the list goes on and on and on... I think that there's just more of an acknowledgement that the world isn't as rosy as everyone would want to think it is.

Millennials' comfort with social context and structural realities can, however, conflict with their idealism and desire for social change. Samantha believes that this conflict can lead to self-absorption because, “it's easy for us to get wrapped up in what we immediately are interested in.”

*Fear, Pessimism, and Uncertainty*

As part of their awareness of contextual factors, and a final component of the self-definition of the Millennial generation, several respondents mentioned the role of September 11, 2001 in their upbringing, particularly how it led to an apparent climate of general fear and uncertainty. Most Millennials were born in the 1990s and were young during the attacks on the Twin Towers. That this event occurred at the beginning of Millennials' conscious memory means that their lives have only been lived in a post-terrorism world, and social memory of the event has shaped Millennials' own memories (Zerubavel 2011). Lisa described the event as "this weird period of terror that I don't really remember." She went on to say,

I think that factors into the intensity of being very young and seeing this horrible thing happen, and being, like, okay this is my reality. And the weirdness that ensued after 9/11, of terrorist threat warning levels and living in this constant state of fear and living in a very high security world and not really knowing. That was the environment that I grew up in and a lot of us did, and I think that that probably factors into the intensity of "I need to be as well educated as I possibly can and try my best to make a difference, otherwise we'll all die." It's a very pessimistic generation of people where they don't look at the world very nicely and they don't see things very positively because they grew up in a really weird era of terror.

Although Millennials are idealistic, the social context of the "War on Terror" greatly impacted their perspective of the world, forcing them to also see a darker reality. Lisa's comments that Millennials' relentless pursuit of success and social change can be attributed to fear is an interesting perspective, one that raises the further issue of whether the global and social engagement of Millennials can also be attributed to the climate of fear surrounding their childhood.

## ROOM FOR CONFLICT

While the previous section offered some insight into the generational consciousness of Millennials, it is worth noting that when defining any generation there must exist room for conflict and contradiction. Modernity is full of contrasts: innovation and technological advancement are accompanied by the uncertainty of deconstructing traditional structures, freedom brings choice and opportunity yet the difficulty of choosing induces anxiety, and rising individualism makes emotional

connections more difficult even as culture prioritizes emotions. As a modern generation, the Millennial generation personifies the inevitable contradictions of modernization. Many of the previous descriptions of this generation allow room for both sides of a single argument. Millennials are idealistic and pessimistic, competitive and entitled, and desire positive change yet are unable to let things take their necessary time. Even as part of the same generation, Millennials hold both positive and negative self-conceptions and allow them to coexist.

A main source of conflicting opinions is the work ethic of Millennials, a topic often covered in popular culture analyses of this generation. Millennials are described as lazy or entitled because they expect instant gratification, a criticism stemming both from older generations and from within the Millennial generation itself. Lauren described Millennial entitlement as a lack of understanding regarding the steps required to achieve a goal:

I feel like we see the great things that our parents have worked hard for and we just want them. I think that that's a huge issue with the Millennial generation, is that we want what our parents have now. There's been a lot of hand-holding I think, and so we don't quite understand how much hard work our parents put into getting where they are... I think that it's something that a lot of people in the Millennial generation don't understand, I think that that's the hand-holding, that the Millennial generation only saw these great results and doesn't understand what it takes to get there. ... I think that we are less hardworking because we were given so much by our hardworking parents but didn't see the hard work. So I think that we struggle to understand that hard work is what it's going to take to get the things that we want.

Her comments return to the idea that the parenting styles of the 1990s greatly affected the behaviors and attitudes of Millennials. While Lauren acknowledges that young people may lack the work ethic of their parents, she attributes this to parental “hand holding” rather than to any intrinsic flaw.

Similarly, Kayla believed that the “I want it now” attitude of Millennials is because modern technology has made everything faster. She added, “it is a lot easier for us to do things and access things,” and as a result Millennials avoid hard work if there is an easier way to accomplish the same goal.

In contrast, some respondents mentioned self-conceptions of hard work, an idea reflected in discussions of academic pressure. Jenny saw both hard-working and lazy individuals within her peer group, and emphasized that even those who are “trying hard” to establish themselves as adults are prevented from doing so by structural barriers. Aaron was bluntly optimistic: “we’re a pretty smart generation that works hard, that’s going to have a lot of opportunity at our fingertips ... we have chances to learn things quicker than other generations, access to a lot of information that people haven’t had in the past.” Beyond work ethic, the majority of respondents agreed that they saw their generation in a positive light, primarily because they themselves were a member of that generation but also because Millennials represent newness, progress, and the future. Ashley described Millennials as “avant-garde” while Victoria used the phrase “risk takers.” Aaron, although disappointed with modern music, acknowledged “I think we’re pretty lucky to be in the generation of Millennials.”

Nevertheless, three respondents held primarily negative conceptions of the Millennial generation. Kayla stated, “I wish in some ways that I was born in a different time,” believing that Millennials have not shown “the same extent of positive growth as there was before.” She also described young people as incompetent and overly reliant on technology. David also saw Millennials as overly reliant on technology. He described Millennials as worse than other generations because technology has “given them a crutch that is inherently flawed... I’d say they’re worse because of cultural crutches that have been adopted as the normal.” Although highlighting contextual reasons for his negative opinion of Millennials, he describes young people as unable to survive without technology: “we’re leaning on technology to take care of parts of our lives that we should be able to stand on our own.” Antonio criticized the materialism and poor work ethic of Millennials, describing them as “the generation where they want things.” He went on to say that although Millennials want the latest material goods, they are unwilling to work for them:

I feel the older generation, they would work and they would get their own thing, and I feel they really appreciated what they worked for. I feel everything is just handed down to us now. I feel if you got a car in the 70s, you were like, okay, you got a car, you worked for it. You work the summer and you get a car. I feel now it's just handed to us. We, Millennials, don't really want to work. They just want to go to school, get into college. I feel a lot of them just get their stuff handed to them, and not most of them, I'm not saying that. But I feel we really take for granted what we have.

Antonio summarized his comments by saying, "I was born in a crappy generation," and admitted that he often feels isolated from other young people for this reason.

In contrast to previous generations of youth that may have believed in their own infallibility (Feuer 1969), Millennials are often self-critical. Importantly, even those respondents who criticized Millennials included themselves under the umbrella of that term. Switching between using "we" and "them" when discussing Millennials (as visible in Antonio's previous quote) demonstrates that their criticism is not a complete rejection of being a Millennial. Rather, these respondents were comfortable differentiating themselves from "others," indicating once again the heterogeneity and diversity present even within this generation.

## A GENERATION MARKED BY HETEROGENEITY

When the most common understanding of Millennials is a "diverse and unique generation" (Kayla, 20), any generational identity must provide for heterogeneity, diversity, and difference. David accommodated these differences by describing "different sections of Millennials. No matter what demographic you look at, you're always going to find micro-groups inside of that one group." His comment describes what can be called micro-generations, smaller groups divided by other identity factors. Perpetuating the value placed on social context, Millennials understand that different contextual factors lead to heterogeneity within the generation. Their emphasis on being unique also reflects a distinctly modern individualism.

One influential contextual factor is opportunity structure, or social class. Aditi, a woman of color, emphasized that Millennials are not unique from other generations in that they are also affected by structural violence and oppression. Victoria acknowledged that her life experience would be very different for someone “who didn’t have the same educational opportunities as me, or the same financial support from their parents through college.” Several respondents also emphasized that over-generalizations regarding Millennials (such as those found in the media) fail to take into account different sub-groups of the generation. Isabel described how the media’s definitions only apply to those who have attended college, thereby “missing an entire demographic,” and Megan described the influence of family environment on life paths:

If you are in an environment, if you grew up in a family where it's like, “okay so the day you turn 18 you're going to trade school because you need to help us pay rent,” that's different from like “we want you to have a great college experience and study different things and really develop your writing skills.” So I think [the typical definition is] the Millennial generation that is middle class and up.

Many characteristics of Millennials are generalizable to the entire generation – they are young, technologically-engaged, more educated on average – but the influence of other identity factors leads individual Millennials to experience different generational identities. Social class and structural barriers are of primary importance when generalizing: although Millennials are stereotyped as materialistic college students, not all attend college and not all can afford materialism. Identity factors beyond age also serve to diversify the generation, adding to a valued heterogeneity.

### **Uniqueness**

As a result of childhoods centered on individuality, Millennials value being unique and reject homogeneity and generalizability. Most respondents stated that they, as a compilation of characteristics, were unique. Although many provided the caveat that they were shaped by their social context – such as the town in which they grew up or having a sibling with special needs – they ultimately emphasized that as an exact individual they were unique. Victoria described herself as “a

little bit weird,” but countered, “in our day and age that’s good, right? The age of the geek, being a little weird is okay. Celebrate it.” The celebration of uniqueness allowed most of the respondents to counter that everyone is unique. With the exception of a few respondents, most believed that their uniqueness did not imply the homogeneity of others. Ashley described this: “I feel unique and I acknowledge that everyone else feels unique and is probably going through the same things, but it is reassuring. I sort of believe that I am unique in my own way.” Nicole, a 21-year-old from Silicon Valley, stated:

I feel everyone is unique. I feel like everyone has their own worries and their own life goals and their own skills. I feel no one really is the same. Obviously I share some of the same insecurities and that way I’m not unique. But I feel like everyone—the combination of how they look at the world and how they go about with their insecurities. I feel that as a whole you will never find someone else the same as you.

The desire to be unique is a part of the generational identity of Millennials. Samantha noted “a big obsession with being unique and being different than other people ... trying to skip to the beat of your own drum.” Lauren also saw, in Millennials, “a positive outlook on being you, and finding your identity, and not just being someone next to you.” She went on to say that future generations will value being unique to a greater extent because Millennials still experience “pressure from our parents to fit in and not create waves” but that conformity will be less important in the future. Pressure from adults was also described by Megan:

Adults always say this, “you're not special, you think you're special,” or “all these kids are applying to jobs and they think they're so special and they think their volunteer experience is so amazing, like no it's not, you're all the same.” So I think we are special because we think we're special. And I think older generations ... didn't have an option to be themselves and think about what makes me unique, it was just sort of like “okay, now I'm a cog in the machine of capitalist United States and let's continue, let me accept my fate.”

That Millennials emphasize their individuality partly as a rejection of the conformity of older generations indicates the extent to which uniqueness is a value held by the generation in its entirety. In some ways, this uniqueness serves as a generational identity bordering on conformity. The value of uniqueness was reinforced by parenting styles that explored and fostered children’s differences.

Megan cites her learning difference as an indicator of how Millennials were given the option to label and understand their differences rather than being shunned for them. She also attributed her parents' willingness to understand her differences to their social status and education. In this way, although Millennials themselves value heterogeneity and uniqueness, they are supported to varying degrees by older generations.

Millennials' use of social media also contributes to their individuality. Samantha described how she uses social media to "create a kind of brand for myself" while Jenny explained how the uniqueness of Millennials is designed to make them "stand out within those millions of people on social media." Samantha also went on to say that "self expression is always big in young people," and so the combination of Millennials' youth and exposure to social media and technology allows them to construct a particular image in the eyes of others. Although these images can take diverse forms, the main goal is to emphasize the uniqueness of the individual using whatever tools are available. Jacqueline described the influence of social media on individuality:

I think that having social media and Internet has allowed people to be more expressive and creative. Millennials are very unique ... just growing up with access to whatever we wanted to do ... even the style of dressing is unique, our own kind of generation. I feel like back then there were distinct styles of clothing throughout the years and in this generation, you can pull bits and pieces from other generations and make your own style. ... There's a lot of influence because you're able to see things on the Internet and through social media.

In short, Millennials see their individuality as something that separates them from older generations, and this distinction places being unique at the center of their generational identity.

### **Exploration**

The individuality of Millennials is also based on their having the freedom to explore different life possibilities. As Jeffrey Arnett (2000) explains, the life stage of Millennials – emerging adulthood – is marked by personal change and exploration. He describes how young adults are still able to pursue many different directions and are given the freedom to explore those different paths without fully choosing one. Megan echoed his thoughts,

It's the idea of, I have so many options of what I could study and I want to find the right thing, or I have so many options of jobs that I could have. Because it's not like I'm just looking in the newspaper, you have the internet, you could find a job in another country. From here. That's not how it was even 10 years ago, let alone when my parents were growing up. So I think you have so many more options and it makes choosing harder and more overwhelming... Because there are more choices, there are more opportunities to be an individual.

Her acknowledgement of the difficulties of infinite choice echoes Eva Illouz (2007) while also adding that the individuality of younger generations may be a result of their increased opportunities. Samantha also emphasized that the exploration of Millennials is linked with college and being young. She described how her college experience pushed her to grow intellectually and form her own opinions. Although clearly a positive aspect of many of the respondents' lives, Megan went on to say that college provides a time for exploration that stalls adulthood, ultimately leading to a more difficult transition. This thought is similar to that expressed by Satya Byock (2015), who emphasized that modern educational structures do not prepare students for adulthood. Megan expanded upon her theory: "our adolescence is drawn out, and I think we are duped into believing that you can do whatever you want, and explore, and find your passion." While she was in favor of exploration during emerging adulthood – she cited her own life path as a positive example of this – she admitted that exploration can set Millennials up for disappointment.

Having time to explore also leads Millennials to focus on what Nicole termed their "dream life." She described how there is an "expectation that you should be living your dream life right away." Because so many options are available, young adults now feel pressure to immediately pursue their ideal pathway. This path does not necessarily mean materialistic achievement. Rather, Priya believes that young adults are more focused on experiences and creating positive change. She stated, "I think Millennials are a lot more into finding meaningful work, finding their purpose in life, having experiences. I think Millennials are more about traveling, eating in nice places, and not settling down very young as opposed to trying to get a stable job and get married and have kids." Adding to the

pressures of adulthood, of which young adults are acutely aware, the pressure to do something meaningful and to explore may add to the anxieties of this generation. However, although anxiety-inducing, exploration and uniqueness are prioritized and valued by Millennials, demonstrating a distinctly modern phenomenon.

## THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE YOUNG

As Millennials grow older, and Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers begin to pass away, a shift will occur in society. A central tenet of life course theory holds that aging on a societal level will lead to wide scale social change, as older generations are replaced by younger generations with different value structures. These changes are already happening. David commented on this social change:

I feel like as Millennials become the greater population, you'll start to see that work into the way the world manages itself. I think that you'll definitely see that happen. You'll see that shift because of Millennials. You'll see that shift in politics; you'll see that shift in the way that companies work. Like if you look at companies nowadays, bigger companies like tech companies specifically, since we're close to Silicon Valley. And the way that they set up their campuses, the way that it changes work into a lifestyle; that's not how older generations were brought up. It's definitely, do you blame that on Millennials or do you blame that on just times changing? Maybe both. Maybe they go hand in hand.

Social change occurs inevitably as time passes, and Millennials play the same role as every generation of youth. As older generations are “de-authorized” (Feuer 1969) and Millennials begin to occupy social and political positions of power, society will inevitably experience change.

### **Possible Intergenerational Conflict**

The progression of social change is likely to result in intergenerational conflict, some of which is already visible in criticisms of old and young stemming from both sides of the divide. Millennials are generally progressive and want social change. They are more liberal than their parents, accustomed to a technology-centered culture, and want rapid change and instant

gratification. The fast-pace of younger generations creates conflicts with older generations. Josh commented,

I think that it may seem to older generations that Millennials are moving really fast. That's because society as a whole is moving really fast. We were born into that. I think that Millennials kind of hit the ground running, whereas some of the older generations, maybe not so much... They are still getting caught up with it, they are older now and maybe they just hit that point in their lives when they're not going to change anymore and they're like "why do I care?" So it has a cynicism to it, like "well I don't really feel like changing, so I'm not going to change." The Millennial generation, even before Millennials as a term was a thing, it was already picking up the pace we were born into. We kind of run with it, but that might seem kind of crazy to someone older.

David also added that because older generations "have lived a majority of their lives without technology ... it's hard for them to relate to people who have never known anything but the information that's at people's fingertips nowadays." He added that being accustomed to technology leads to a different thought process, where younger generations are always searching for a faster way to do something. Conflict regarding social change is an inevitable aspect of social life. Antonio noted some animosity between generations, yet the animosity between Millennials and older generations is not unique to modernity. Amanda, a 20-year-old from the Central Coast, summarized: "Those generations are going to butt heads about ways of doing things. I guess some older people don't like change." Whether or not older generations are open to change brought by Millennials is an unanswerable question in this study, but because many respondents were of the opinion that older people resented the changes of youth, their perception is important to considering Millennials' generational resentment.

Howe and Strauss (2000) describe the "kinderpolitics" of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries as political attitudes that value and aim to protect children. Emphasis was placed on the fact that children represent the future, and so adults were tasked with the responsibility of protecting the Earth and designing human societies to the benefit of their children. Growing up in this climate led Millennials, understandably, to see themselves as the future. This vision adds to tangible

intergenerational conflict. Because they understand that the future is in their hands, Millennials want older generations to take them seriously and allow them to pursue the changes they want, but feel that they are blocked by conflict and criticism. Ashley described how, because older generations already “had their chance to address their issues and fight for change ... it is easy for Millennials ... to think that their [own] issues are more important.” This sentiment is, importantly, not unique to Millennials but rather representative of the self-centeredness of youth.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter began with the question of whether Millennials can be considered a cohesive generation if they lack an associative identity with the term “Millennial.” Although the term Millennial itself does not fill young adults with a sense of identity or cohesion, Millennials do share a generational consciousness: they see themselves as diverse, progressive, and technologically-focused. Most importantly, Millennials see themselves as a generation marked by heterogeneity that values uniqueness and personal exploration.

Millennials represent a distinctly modern generation because they understand their identity as related to a specific social context and prioritize individualism. Mirroring the reflexivity of modernity, Millennials are a reflexive generation, one that is in-tune with their social environment. Emerging adulthood is a time of identity formation, and this process is reflected in the way that Millennials understand their identity both subjectively and socially. However, identity formation in the context of emerging adulthood is a tenuous and anxiety-inducing process. Millennials, as a result of their life stage, must look toward the future and manage their fears, uncertainties, and anxieties about the unknown.

## **CHAPTER 3. LOOKING TOWARDS ADULTHOOD: EXPECTATIONS, ANXIETIES AND FEARS**

Throughout childhood, a primary focus is “growing up” and the privileges and responsibilities that process entails. Eisenstadt (1956) and Erikson (1968) both argue that children and adolescents develop an understanding of adulthood through personal experience with the central adults in their lives, primarily parents, guardians, or other relatives. Furthermore, Eisenstadt argues that growing up becomes a process of moving from collective identity towards “internal solidarity,” or individualized identity (1956:183). Although childhood is social and community-based, adulthood is primarily individual. Millennials’ perspectives on growing up reflect these theories. Respondents’ initial expectations for adulthood centered around independence and reflected their own childhood experiences. Over time, these expectations were met with various realities and Millennials were forced to adapt. This chapter discusses the Millennial generation’s transition into adulthood and its accompanying anxieties, worries, and concerns. The concerns of Millennials reflect both the existential anxiety of modernity and the difficulties of emerging adulthood. In many ways, their experiences uniquely reflect this historical moment in time, but in other ways Millennials share similar concerns and anxieties to previous generations of youth. As a life stage, emerging adulthood represents possibility, a concept that is simultaneously exciting and scary. Although Millennials want to become independent adults, this desire is accompanied by a deep uncertainty about what “being an adult” truly means and a fear of the unknown.

### **GROWING UP: EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY**

#### **Childhood Expectations**

Respondents’ childhood notions of adulthood emphasized independence and self-sufficiency. Casey noted, “in my mind being an adult was very much an individual affair. It’s

something you do by yourself and there is a lot of responsibility.” Lisa commented, “in terms of aging and wanting to be older and being an adult, what I want is independence,” a statement echoed by Antonio, Michael, and others. Aside from independence, many respondents stated that as children they had only hazy understandings of adulthood. Priya and Catherine both described how their knowledge of potential jobs was limited, and other respondents joked that as children they had no idea about what it means to be an adult. Despite, and perhaps because of, this limited knowledge, many respondents were excited to grow up. Jacqueline stated, “when I was four, I wanted to be five, and when I was eight, I wanted to be ten. I always wanted to be older.” Their excitement about growing up, however, has significantly lessened over time. Matthew, a 24-year-old from a rural part of the Central Coast, described this: “I couldn’t wait to grow up. I couldn’t wait to not be a kid anymore. And now I’m still young, but I’d do anything to go back to being nine or ten years old.” Whether or not this is unique to Millennials, their childhood nostalgia is a surprising contrast to the typical desire of young people to eschew their childhood and adolescence.

These vague expectations of adulthood were not developed in a vacuum but rather were influenced by the social context of Millennials’ childhood. Lauren believed that her image of adulthood reflected how she saw the adults around her:

It was really about that adults got to do what they wanted because they had the money, because there wasn’t a parent who needed to drive them places. They were doing everything that they wanted to do... I think it was a reflection of the things that I wanted but couldn’t have, and so I just figured adults could do those things. It was very much a reflection of the things I didn’t have or couldn’t do and wanted to do.

Nicole added that her limited knowledge was a result of “not being exposed to other things,” while Josh elaborated, “as a 9- or 10-year-old you have absolutely no sense of what life is at all. Just nothing. Absolutely nothing. Like not at all, nothing. And so the goal was to recreate what I had at home.” Josh’s words reflect generational theory on identity formation, particularly how children understand social roles through the behaviors of close family members operating within those roles.

Most respondents expressed that their parents had positive expectations for them that helped to shape their own expectations. Millennials' parents seemed to prioritize their children's happiness, which pushed Millennials to center their own goals on happiness. Importantly, no specific definition of happiness was attached to these expectations, indicating the subjective and emotional component of Millennials' expectations for the future.

Samantha summarized the role her family played in shaping her own expectations: "I always just assumed I would go to college. I was going to have this life. I was going to settle down and have kids, probably in the Bay Area, send them to the same schools. It's based off of what you're used to." Her assumption about college is one made by several other respondents, nearly all of those who were enrolled in or had graduated from college. Michael summarized, "I knew I was going to go to college because that was just what you do. You go to college." Importantly, not all respondents mentioned college as an expectation. Some openly rejected the notion, which will be discussed later in this chapter, while others did not mention it at all. Despite popular culture's deep association between Millennials and college, there is still a portion of the generation that is constructing narratives of adulthood outside of the college pathway (see Silva 2012).

### **Expectations Upon Entering Adulthood**

As Millennials obtain more life experience, inevitably their expectations for adulthood adapt to take more information into account. These experiences can help construct defined expectations, but can also cause Millennials to realize exactly how undefined their expectations really are. Older respondents – particularly those with jobs they enjoyed – tended to have more defined expectations for their future. Aaron acknowledged the role his job played in allowing him to feel stable: "I work with my family business and I always knew I was going to do that... My future is probably more straightforward in my mind than most people my age." Other respondents, such as Lauren, expressed a desire to move onto other "adult" milestones: "I'm a teacher, so my vision is, within the

next two years, to get married, actually be living with my boyfriend... and I really want to have a child before I'm 30, so sometime within the next five years having a child but still working.”

Expectations such as buying a home, getting married, and having children, despite being traditional markers of adulthood, were not focal points for the majority of respondents. Rather, many focused on shorter term goals such as financial independence, graduating college, or finding a job.

Compared to previous generations, Millennials' life goals are more individual and career-focused. Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman (2012) utilized two nationally representative surveys to explore generational differences in young adults' life goals between Baby Boomers, Generation X-ers, and Millennials. Defining Millennials as those born between 1982 and 2003, the authors found that Generation X-ers and Millennials, when compared to Baby Boomers, value extrinsic goals (such as money and fame) more than intrinsic goals (such as self-acceptance). While Baby Boomers may have been focusing on personal, emotional goals, Millennials are more focused on material self-sufficiency. Zilca (2016) found that, as a component of their emphasis on individual success, Millennials tend to be career-focused and to emphasize career-related goals. Perhaps as a result of the individualistic nature of modernity, Millennials' expectations for the future are centered on themselves as individuals. Rather than set starting a traditional family as their goal, Millennials prioritize independence and self-sufficiency.

While some respondents had expectations for their future, many more spoke of creating a “loose vision” or “tentative plan” and then allowing for important exploration or deviation. Michael described this, “I have an idea of a career path, but aside from that I'm like cool, wherever that takes me is I guess where I'll go.” Megan described how “in maybe the past couple years, [I've] concluded okay here's a tentative plan.” She went on to say, “I'm just not quite there yet. I have some ideas, not really sure, so let's not make any grounding decisions. Let's not drop a bunch of money or take out loans if I'm not exactly sure this is what I want to do for the next several years at least.” Her

caution about making fixed plans reflects both the explorative tendency of the Millennial generation and the unmoored quality of modernity.

The tentative plans of Millennials often directly oppose their childhood constructions of adulthood. Jacqueline described how “I don’t have any of the same dreams I had when I was little,” indicating that her childhood desire to “have a house near my parents, have a family, be a doctor” is not reflected in her current plan for her future. The uncertainty marks a departure from basing personal expectations on familiar experiences, but respondents such as Ashley emphasized their acceptance of this uncertainty: “I am a little more okay with the fact that I don’t know. Partially because I know I have options and there’s stuff that I can do.” On the other hand, respondents such as Jenny were uncomfortable with not knowing: “I’ve always just been envious of people who are like, ‘I’m going to be a nurse,’ because they know exactly what they want to do. They go to school for that and it’s their straight path. And mine just feels very open. I’m waiting to be enlightened by something, but it hasn’t happened.” As a component of coming of age, Erikson (1968) describes how young people are often forced to deconstruct their hierarchies of expectations. This disruption makes identity formation more difficult, often leading to confusion and uncertainty. This uncertainty, a central component of emerging adulthood, simultaneously allows for exploration and the possibility of “finding oneself” and for failure, stagnation, and anxiety. Summarized by Erikson, “in no other stage of the life cycle, then, are the promise of finding oneself and the threat of losing oneself so closely allied” (1968:244).

### **Acknowledging Reality**

During childhood, respondents held expectations that, upon growing up, they realized were not realistic. Lauren joked, “once I was in college I soon realized that you can’t just go shopping all the time.” Catherine echoed Lauren’s point when she discussed “material realities.” Acknowledging reality was an important component of adjusting expectations for the future, and a form of reflexive

engagement with the world, although often anxiety and uncertainty-inducing (Erikson 1968). Megan described how reality caused her to change her expectations for her career path when her initial job after college, which she thought would be relatively permanent, was not what she hoped for. Priya also saw a change in her expectations regarding employment:

It's much more realizing that the reality of almost any job will be like, there's going to be a lot of checking your emails, there's going to be a lot paperwork and just doing mundane things. Which is fine because it probably shouldn't be exciting all the time. You need some downtime. Just this idea that there's so many more jobs out there that are much less like large outlines of the kind of work you could do and more just like, "This is a specific, small job you do." Also, just the idea that, as a non-STEM major, a lot of jobs don't actually require the skills that you got in college.

Priya's acceptance of the inevitable minutiae of adult jobs paints a very different picture from her childhood expectations, a picture that has been formulated through increased exposure to adulthood. While having to acknowledge reality may not be a component of adulthood specific to Millennials, it can be argued that Millennials are less prepared than previous generations to face these realities, particularly due to the protective role played by their parents (to be discussed in Chapter 5).

Several respondents described specific structural constraints or life events that forced them to change their expectations for the future. Michael described how, although as a child he entertained dreams of living in Europe, he has come to terms with the "reality of the situation." This reality included a developmentally disabled sibling, for whom Michael will have to care once his parents pass away. He acknowledged that, "moving across the globe isn't realistic. Essentially not being on the West Coast isn't realistic; not being in the Bay Area isn't realistic." Jenny expressed frustration with how long she spent obtaining her bachelor's degree. She stated, "I could have been doing things sooner. That's always a big thing... things I wanted could have been done sooner and I could have gotten on with real life sooner." Both of these constraints demonstrate how the process of reaching adulthood involves the acknowledgement of "reality."

Two respondents in particular experienced critical life events that forced them to re-evaluate their expectations for the future. Matthew devoted most of his adolescence and young adulthood to becoming a professional athlete and at the time of his interview was coming to terms with the impossibility of achieving his dream. He describes the difficulty of changing gears:

I don't know what I'm going to do. I feel like I've devoted so much of my time to trying to be an athlete that I've missed out on some key parts to life that I needed to experience to help me get older. Work. This is pretty much my first year of trying to work and race and train and cycle. How many people have to go to work from nine to five and fit in what they enjoy doing in between work, and they get it done? Most people don't complain about it because it's life, it's reality. You gotta work.

His acknowledgement of reality was accompanied by a similar frustration and resignation to that of Michael and Jenny. Perhaps the most unique example of how significant life events can change future expectations is David's situation. David, who was married in June 2014, was undergoing a divorce at the time of the interview in July 2016. In his words: "27 and divorced. Yeah. My expectations of what my life was going to be have altered significantly."

#### *Adaptation and Readjustment*

When discussing reality, many respondents emphasized the importance of adapting their expectations and readjusting to new realities. Samantha summarized her thoughts,

Things are constantly happening, so on one hand it's really easy to create this life plan, but it sounds worse if you do that because you don't know what's going to change. You don't know who you're going to meet that will change your mind, or that job you thought you really liked but it's actually really shitty for you and you don't like it at all. You don't know how things are going to impact you, or how your path will change.

Her emphasis on flexibility employs a common strategy for coping with future-related anxieties. A similar strategy was described by Lisa, who stated that "reality is keeping me relatively stable, in terms of—part of me really does know that this is just not possible, so you can talk all you want... but it's really not going to happen." Coping strategies will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Notably, both of these quotes demonstrate how acknowledging both possibility and impossibility allows Millennials to develop realistic expectations that are open to adaptation.

Readjustment is not always a positive experience, however. Two respondents described how they adapted their goals and expectations based on negative situations. Ashley described how her struggle with mental health problems in her last two years of high school “impacted my life at the time, and because of that it impacted how I saw my future.” While she still fulfilled her childhood dream of attending college, she was not accepted to her top schools. In retrospect she added that the change was not necessarily negative. Jacqueline described how lowering her own expectations for herself prevented her from feeling disappointed:

When I was in high school, I came to the conclusion that—I didn't feel like I was necessarily setting my sights lower for myself, but I started to realize that I don't know if being a doctor is the right thing for me. You know when you put too much pressure on yourself for one thing that's a really hard, almost unattainable goal, you're just going to be disappointed. It sounds kind of cynical, and I think it was at the time, but it's just something more peaceful and realistic. If you don't really have big goals and you set your sights low, you'll never be disappointed, so that was my thing. I don't really hope for anything or hope for that much because I don't want to feel disappointed, and that was my mindset.

For Jacqueline, lowering her expectations allowed her to find “peace” and to pursue her goals with more confidence. However, she added that she sometimes does question whether she lowered her expectations too far and is not achieving her full potential.

### **Mixed Emotions About the Future**

Expectations for the future were inevitably accompanied by mixed emotions. The majority of respondents expressed both excitement and nervousness, an understandable reaction within the context of emerging adulthood as a time of transition, opportunity, and unknown. The equilibrium centered around excitement for the possibility and anxiety for the unknown. Several respondents summarized their feelings:

I'm excited about it but I'm also really anxious, because I have so many questions. I'm excited because I know that I can just try different things and that I can try to figure out what is going to make me happy, like what job is going to make me happy, and how I can be useful to society. (Megan, 24)

I'm excited for everything, [to] see what happens. But it also scares me—after I graduate in three years, where am I going to go? Should I buy a house somewhere or not? (Jacob, 19)

I'm a little excited, a little apprehensive. Thinking about graduate school just makes me so nervous and anxious. But then thinking about being done with this, not having to worry about where I'm going, it's exciting and also just like starting a new chapter in my life. (Nicole, 21)

It's a mix probably. Yes, I'm excited because there's so much opportunity, but I am a little apprehensive just because there's so much going on in the world right now and housing costs are skyrocketing and things like that. (Casey, 25)

Although each respondent was in a different moment in their life, from a different background, and had different goals, all were both worried and excited about their future. Jacob, a 19-year-old from the Central Coast, perhaps most concisely summarized the concerns of Millennials: “Dreaming is positive, but actually trying to think about how that might happen, what needs to happen to make that happen, is stressful.” As a life stage that represents a threshold, emerging adulthood is accompanied by both the excitement and anxiety of opportunity and infinite choice.

## SETTING GOALS AND DEFINING SUCCESS

Along with expectations, Millennials have goals for their future, many of which center around being “successful.” Respondents’ expectations of adult independence led them to establish becoming independent as a main goal and core component of success in adulthood. Jeffrey Arnett describes how during the transition to adulthood, there is “an emphasis in emerging adulthood on becoming a self-sufficient person” (2000:473). He goes on to say that financial independence was ranked by emerging adults as a key component of becoming self-sufficient. Financial independence was described by a majority of the respondents in this study as a main goal upon entering adulthood and – although not the only definition – remained a common standard by which to measure success.

Of those respondents that specifically mentioned financial independence as a goal for the future, two points of view were dominant. The first was an equivalence between money and success. Emi, a 20-year-old from Silicon Valley, reflected this attitude: “In order to survive you need money,

obviously. My parents ... can only help so much. So I need to find something I'm good at that I can be successful and get a lot of money." Emi's perspective is a direct link between earning potential and success, a traditional view of success. However, most respondents who mentioned financial stability as an important aspect of success did not necessarily mean to imply that being wealthy means being successful. As Kayla describes, "I think money also contributes [to my image of success] but it's not all the factors of success."

Most respondents expressed a desire for financial self-sufficiency in order to not have to constantly worry about money. This is not unique to Millennials but rather a normative expectation in American society, and Millennials are not so different from previous generations as to not have the goal of financial independence. Aaron mentioned wanting to buy a house, while Thomas described wanting to "provide well for whatever family I end up having...[by] being able to provide a better lifestyle and a safe place for my family to live in." Similarly, Samantha outlined her desires for financial stability:

I want to live in different places. I want to be able to do that, to not feel restricted financially. I want to be able to feel comfortable, but I imagine the path I'm taking will be well-off. I probably won't need to worry about it since tech pays well. I'm not too concerned about it. I don't need to have a top job. I don't need to do anything. I just want to be able to live in an apartment in a good part of town and be able to have brunch and go out on weekends and I'm fine. If I don't feel uncomfortable with money, then I'm okay.

This attitude simultaneously equates financial stability with success while rejecting a form of materialism that prioritizes wealth. Amanda expressed her desire for financial self-sufficiency as an ideal divergence from a childhood where money was a problem: "I honestly just don't want to have to worry about money... I feel my whole life I've just heard my parents, and that's all they've ever fought about...conversations about money are so draining." These responses express a desire for stability achieved through financial independence.

Some respondents did equate success with being able to afford luxuries. Nicole described wanting to be able to travel and acknowledged that her own version of success includes "the

financial stability to be able to do that.” Aaron, more jokingly, said, “I’ve been working since I was fifteen...I like it. I like being able to...spend money and go to concerts and do whatever I need to. I have an expensive lifestyle.” While these two versions may raise the bar for success beyond simply not having to worry about money, they remain minimally materialistic, focusing more on travel and experiences than possessing objects. This desire to travel, emphasis on experiences, and rejection of materialism (even among those who prioritized financial independence and earning money) was typical of many of the Millennials interviewed.

### **Rejecting a Single Definition of Success**

Although most respondents had a somewhat clear vision of success, some also emphasized that there is not one single definition. Aditi most thoroughly critiqued existing cultural definitions, bringing up the matter again at the end of our interview. In her words,

I think – and I don't know if this is a young people thing or a societal white privilege thing – that there's only one right way to be successful or be a member of society...I grew up thinking that going to college is important and I want to be successful so I'll go to college, but that's not really the case. You can be a successful human being [without going to college]. And I think that's pushed on youth a lot, in that like if you don't go to ... an important university, who are you?

She went on to describe how “elitist structures in our societies control the ways that young people have opportunities to do things” and emphasized that many life paths can be considered successful. Her thoughts were echoed by Antonio, who also criticized the social emphasis placed on college as a pathway to success:

I think we grew up in a time where if you didn't go to college, you're really not going to make anything of yourself. There's an expectation that a degree be part of your life and a lot of people feel that pressure...School's not for everyone. And I feel most of the time we forget about that, because we see ourselves going to college, because either a parent tells us that we need to or society tells us that we need to, because we're not going to get a job anywhere else. I feel like a lot of the time we forget that college isn't for everyone. It's not for everyone. We need to accept that that's okay too. I have a lot of friends that aren't in college; they decided not to go to college, and they have a great life now... I feel like a lot of the time we put ourselves with a lot of pressure that we need to go to school and we need to get that degree and we really forget about what we really want in life. I feel like most of the times we just forget about ourselves sometimes, and just do what society wants us to do.

Both Aditi and Antonio, as well as other respondents, highlighted the important role of perceived structural constraints and individual differences in creating individualized definitions of success.

Aditi and Antonio's comments indicate a rejection of the notion that there exists a homogenous pathway toward adulthood. Modernity, by disrupting traditional structures and allowing for increased freedom of choice, presents Millennials with the opportunity to explore and make their own choices regarding their future. However, many of the anxieties experienced by Millennials (explored later in this chapter) are exacerbated by the uncertainty of this freedom. Several respondents admitted being jealous of their peers who have chosen a straightforward, traditional path into adulthood. While Millennials may emphasize subjective definitions of adulthood and success, the lack of objectivity can be anxiety-inducing, leading emerging adults to be insecure about the path they have chosen to follow (see Chapter 4).

### **More Important than Money**

Part of rejecting a monolithic definition of success, Millennials emphasized that other things such as happiness, balance, and meaningful engagement with the world were more important factors than money in making them feel successful. These goals demonstrate a growing emphasis on emotional versions of success, where young people follow therapeutic narratives for adulthood (Silva 2012). Although aware of structural needs and constraints, Millennials place value on pursuing their emotional desires. Millennials' goals for adulthood and markers of success, then, are shifted to incorporate the idea of "feeling like an adult," rather than calibrated to fit traditional milestones.

The balance between financial self-sufficiency and emotional happiness was described by several respondents. Isabel commented, "I don't feel the need to have so much. Just enough." Her rejection of materialism was echoed by Victoria: "I care more about personal and people relationships than I do about money." Several respondents also emphasized that their life path is based on personal enjoyment rather than financial success; Isabel and Catherine mentioned that they

chose their major in college based on what they enjoy. Although Jacqueline did describe falling into the trap of “Googling nurses that make the most money,” she conceded that her decision to become a nurse is “not about the money, it has to be what’s going to make me the happiest.” This is not the case for all, however, as Amanda described deciding to major in business because it would be lucrative.<sup>5</sup> Nicole combined the seemingly opposing perspectives: “there is an emphasis on money, but it is that added pressure to also be doing something you love in combination with the financial side.”<sup>6</sup>

Happiness was mentioned by many respondents as their main goal for adulthood, again indicating a transition to subjective and emotional goals. In a review of social science literature, Bartram (2012) describes happiness as “the affective component of subjective well-being” (Bartram 2012:645). As a sociological concept, happiness is socially and culturally relative: in the United States, happiness is associated with economic stability, personal achievement, and self-esteem (649). As a result, Millennials’ definitions of happiness are not purely subjective. Rather, setting “happiness” as one’s goal incorporates not only emotional well-being but also a vast array of other goals such as stability, achievement, and interpersonal connection. By establishing happiness as a component of personal success, Millennials are able to frame their goals emotionally and subjectively while maintaining more traditional material components.

Kayla defined her version of success: “I think being successful means being content with your job, career, and personal life.” Antonio added, “I feel happiness is success, it’s the key. If you’re happy then that’s everything that matters and nothing else should.” Several respondents also described how their goals for adulthood are centered around being happy. Amanda commented, “I

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Amanda and Jacqueline are sisters. The dramatic difference between them on this issue may be due to birth order or personality differences.

<sup>6</sup> While not explored here, the conflation of money and happiness is a central issue in American culture. Whether money brings happiness or detracts from it remains a dialectical tension.

just need to go with the flow and hopefully it just clicks. I'll find something I'm passionate about. Know what I want to do. Honestly I just want to be happy.” David took an approach centered on personal growth: “my expectations of the future are making myself into somebody better. What I do will just come with who I am.” Their statements emphasize that finding the right path will make them happy, but also express confidence that they can create happiness for themselves under any circumstances. Antonio mentioned that “either way I go I'm going to be happy with what I choose to do.” His comments and those of others demonstrate an ontological trust that things will work out in their favor.

Other comments prioritized finding a “balance” in life, yet another subjective criterion. Priya described how finding time to maintain friendships, travel, and pursue hobbies would give her the necessary “down time” to make her feel happy. Although she expressed a desire for financial self-sufficiency and a job she enjoys, her goals for the future were not limited to the realm of work but extended into her personal and emotional life. Jacqueline described how her emphasis on balance helps her to trust that she will meet her goals: “I think it's really important to have hopes and dreams, but it's also important to forgive yourself if you don't become what you hope for. As long as you're happy and as long as you're helping the world in some way, I think it will be okay.” Her comments, as well as those of other respondents establishing happiness and emotional balance as central goals for adulthood, demonstrate a life plan that places material stability within an emotional narrative.

### *Meaningful Work*

While most respondents expressed wanting to become financially independent, they added a subjective component to this goal, establishing “meaningful work” as a sign of practical and emotional success. Priya was one of the respondents who most adamantly discussed meaningful work. She believed that her generation's desire to “find purpose in a career” is different from older

generations, and admits “it is a luxury in certain ways.”<sup>7</sup> She emphasized, “In terms of my future, my adult life, I want to be career-minded, care a lot about my career and whether I’m doing some sort of good in the world, because that’s really important to me.” Her desire to do good in the world reflects both the social and emotional engagement of Millennials. Jenny described how she “was always into doing something that I loved and that mattered,” a position which led her to the Peace Corps. At the time of the interview she had been rejected from her first application, but insisted that through the Peace Corps she wanted “to do something that means something, that helps people.”<sup>8</sup>

Like other generations during their transition to adulthood, Millennials have goals for their future and images of the success they hope to obtain. These goals center on the independence they see as a key component of adulthood, a self-sufficiency based on financial independence and stability. However, they also maintain subjective versions of success that are not always materialistic. This departure from traditional pathways is yet another example of the modern-ness of the Millennial generation. Beyond material success, Millennials value “emotional success.” They hope to be happy and to make a difference as adults, a desire summarized by Samantha: “I just want to make sure that I’m happy with what I’m doing, the work that I’m doing is benefiting other people in some way, and that all the work isn’t for myself.” Paradoxically, that their own happiness stems from helping others adds an individual component to Millennials’ desire to do meaningful work. Ultimately, engagement in meaningful work is a component of young adults’ individual happiness,

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<sup>7</sup> In many instances, Millennials were quick to generalize about older generations. This is a component of their generational resentment and reflexive identity formation. By distancing themselves from previous generations, Millennials feel that they are establishing a unique generational identity. Additionally, by criticizing older generations, Millennials are able to counteract the negative stereotypes about themselves that prevail in popular culture. This thesis does not attempt to validate or present as true the generalizations made by respondents about previous generations but merely aims to present the opinions of respondents.

<sup>8</sup> The reader will be pleased to know that Jenny was accepted into the Peace Corps when she applied a second time and will be stationed abroad in June 2017.

and while many Millennials wish to promote social change and make a difference, their reasons for doing so are necessarily conflated with their own desires for personal happiness and fulfillment.

## CONCERNS, ANXIETIES, AND FEARS ABOUT THE FUTURE

As Millennials move into adulthood, their transition is accompanied by inevitable anxieties, worries, concerns, and fears. What does adulthood entail? Will they find a job? Will they be happy? What happens if they fail to meet their own expectations? While a distinctly anxiety-inducing life stage, emerging adulthood affects different individuals in different ways. Some respondents seemed very concerned about the future while others redirected their concern into preparation and careful thought. The broad age range of 17 to 27 also means that respondents were in slightly different life stages. Lisa, who was interviewed just after her high school graduation, and David, the 27-year-old divorcee, understandably had different concerns about the future. College students worried about post-college life while those with jobs were less worried about finding employment but had concerns about other life markers such as buying a house, becoming a better person, or starting a family.

A handful of respondents expressed specific experiences with anxiety disorders (such as social anxiety). While psychological anxiety disorders can add to the existential angst present during major transitions, this study aims not to look at medical anxiety but rather at social factors contributing to generalized anxiety. Chapter 5 will discuss conceptions of mental illness and diagnosed anxiety. Those who mentioned struggles with mental health problems, as well as several other respondents, discussed the powerful nature of generalized, existential anxiety. Megan described consistent struggles with depression and anxiety throughout childhood and adolescence. This has extended towards adulthood: “there are a lot of terrible things about being an adult, where you are in charge of everything...I’m not obsessed with this adulthood you speak of... Everything makes me worried.” Nicole was surprised by the stresses of adulthood, commenting “I expected to

not be so stressed out, but that's just not going to happen," while Emi stated that stress "has a role in my life... I think it makes me who I am." Lisa, describing her anxiety disorder, added: "I live in a constant state of anxiety. I am always anxious, and I always find something new to be anxious about."

This idea that "everything" about adulthood is stressful was echoed by Ashley, who also described difficulties with her mental health in high school:

Anxiety is developed in so many facets of our life that it's like a general feeling that you feel all the time and therefore end up associating with almost everything whether it is logical or not. I don't know if it is just the people I surround myself with or not, but it seems to me that there is that constant worry. Because that worry stays with you for so long, it ends up affecting so many different things that you end up worrying about that maybe you don't need to... Because this general worry can be applied to anything. And it's just a reaction that people have to growing up and things like that.

While exacerbated by psychological difficulties, generalized anxiety also has social roots. Ashley's description of constant worry is indicative of the tenuous nature of an emerging adulthood experienced in modernity. While modernity theorists comment on the increased presence of existential dread and ontological insecurity in the fluid context of modernity (Giddens 1990;1991), this insecurity is doubled by the fragility and confusion of emerging adulthood. Ashley's attribution of her anxiety to being surrounded by peers also undertaking difficult transitions again reinforces the social nature of generalized anxiety. Megan's comments strengthen the idea that this life stage is particularly difficult: "I think it's really, really painful to be in a stage where you feel alone and you don't know what your place is in the world and things are hard. You're like, 'but what am I supposed to do, and why is it so hard?'" In this way, the existential concerns of the Millennial generation are deeply rooted in social factors, but exacerbated and pushed to the forefront of consciousness to varying degrees by psychological differences.

### **Anxiety About the Future**

As Thomas put succinctly, “planning for the future is definitely the most stressful” aspect of Millennials’ lives. Nicole added that her anxiety about the future can be overwhelming, to the extent that “it feels like the end of the world,” and most respondents mentioned worries about the future as a core component of their present concerns. The hyperbolic nature – perhaps a tendency of modernity – used to describe their future-oriented anxiety represents the intensity of this experience for Millennials. Michael was worried about his post-college future, Amanda about graduating early, and Lisa about choosing the right college. Samantha commented that anxiety about the future is inevitable during Millennials’ present stage of life:

Right now, you and me, we are probably very anxious about the next step. Everything needs to have a plan. I'd like to have a schedule to know what's going on, and older people are always like, "just take your time, go travel, you have so much time." But right now we're like “there is no time, it needs to happen right now.” I think that's the mentality, "this needs to happen now." We're very impatient. Even though we have so much life ahead of us, we aren't thinking about that.

Her notion that older generations are unable to understand the specific anxieties and fears of Millennials demonstrates the extent to which the present social and historical circumstances influence the concerns of this generation. Fears for the future centered around three main concepts: fear of the unknown, fear of failure, and fear of not meeting expectations.

#### *Fear of the Unknown*

The future is anxiety-inducing because it represents the unknown. Uncertainty is disconcerting for all humans, but because Millennials are in the process of establishing themselves, their adulthood and entire future are somewhat uncertain. Although based in practicality, Millennials’ fears of the future are primarily emotional, “my worries are based on emotion, and not on reasoning” (Ashley, 20), which can serve to intensify them. Respondents’ expression of fears of the unknown can be categorized in several ways. The first main concern was not knowing what steps to take in order to prepare for an unknown future. Isabel described how, as she grew up, she became “more nervous” about her future because she is “still pretty unsure about what direction I

want to go in.” Her anxiety centers around not knowing what she is “supposed to be doing.”

Antonio also described himself as “at a limbo right now,” expressing uncertainty about whether to change career paths and a desire to focus on the present rather than worrying about the future.

While historically pathways toward adulthood were socially and structurally established, modernity’s paradox of infinite choice leaves many young adults torn between multiple options, unsure about whether their path is the “correct” one.<sup>9</sup>

Fear of the unknown also presented itself literally; several respondents mentioned that not knowing how their future will pan out is anxiety-inducing in and of itself. Nicole described how the future is the most stressful thing because she does not know “where I’ll be a year from now and what my plan will be.” Similarly, Aditi stated, “I really like to have things set six or seven months at a time, so [not knowing what I’ll be doing after graduation] is really freaking me out.” Megan vocalized a similar fear: “Is everything in my life going to turn out okay? Are we going to be fine? Is this going to be okay? ... It’s literally everything in my life I am worried about.” This type of broad extrapolation was experienced differently by individual respondents, but the main theme remained the same. Because Millennials do not know what will happen in the future, they are afraid and anxious.

Part of this fear stemmed from feeling “out of control,” a common emotional experience in the juggernaut of modernity (Giddens 1990). Casey, a contracted college lecturer, described how she was more anxious about decisions made by others over which she had no control than about decisions she had to make herself. Matthew also stated directly that “not having control” is most stressful for him. The perceived lack of control brought about by major life transitions can lead to

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<sup>9</sup> Not all Millennials experience this uncertainty. As described earlier in this chapter, some respondents had very defined expectations for themselves and their future. Aaron, for example, knew from an early age that he would follow his parents’ footsteps and run the family business, and as a result experienced very little fear of the unknown.

increased anxiety and worry, but is also temporary. Lauren, who was interviewed several months after she had established herself as financially independent with a full-time job, attributed her lack of stress to this newfound stability: “I’m in a much better place. I’m in a lot less transition than I was six, eight months ago. Transition means a lot of unknowns, which is heightened anxiety, and so I think I’m just in a better, more level space.” As a transitional stage, emerging adulthood is accompanied by uncertainty, but the responses of older Millennials indicate that transitional anxiety is not a permanent state of being but rather associated with a particular stage of life.

### *Fear of Failure*

Fearing failure is also not unique to Millennials, although some theorists believe that Millennials are uniquely ill-equipped to handle failure (Byock 2015). Respondents’ fears of failing can be separated into two distinct notions: personal failure and life path failure. Personal failure involves a desire to be “good at things.” Michael summarizes: “Achievement-based things are definitely a big source of fear and anxiety for me... I like to be good at things, I don’t like to feel dumb.” Isabel also commented, “I’m stressing about not being good enough for [the computer science industry] ... I’m definitely worried about not being good enough in my chosen field.” This type of fear is personal. Respondents worried that they themselves, as individuals, would fail.

Fear of failure regarding one’s life path involved a concern that the decisions respondents made would be the wrong ones. Matthew expressed a concern that if “I fail over the next couple years, what I’ve been doing since I was 17 with cycling will feel like a complete waste.” Similarly, Jacqueline commented:

In the next two or three years I'm afraid of not liking where I am. I'm afraid of feeling like I don't fit in at my school. I'm afraid of having chosen a wrong career path for myself, like if I start my first day in a nursing class, and I'm like, “oh my god I hate this.” It's like, what do I do?... I think that's a big fear of mine, being stuck. I'm afraid if I'm stuck in a career or stuck in a relationship where I'm not happy, it's a metaphorical claustrophobia. It's like being stuck somewhere I don't belong and that's what is scary for me in the next two to three years.

In their present life stage, Millennials must make important decisions regarding their future. As a generation that values independence, exploration, and social engagement, there are numerous pressures to establish a “successful” life path that simultaneously allows them to be financially independent, pursue their interests, and give back to the community. Modernity also presents the paradox of infinite choice: increased freedom means that young people have more options than ever, but increased options do not make decisions easier.

In some ways, fear of failure can be debilitating. Josh describes this: “I’m a little bit afraid of failure because of any of the down [negative] things that might come with it. And so, it seems sometimes better to not try than to fail.” His anxiety about failure results in a type of risk-aversion that Byock (2015) and Deresiewicz (quoted in Byock 2015) are quick to criticize in this generation. However, awareness of risk is typical of modernity as a whole. Giddens describes the ease of becoming “overwhelmed by anxieties about risks which are implied by the very business of living” (1991:40). Furthermore, in emerging adulthood (as in all periods of transition) the risk and reward paradox feels particularly dramatic and overwhelming, and so the combined insecurities of living in modernity and in a tenuous stage of life may exacerbate risk aversion and the fear of failure in Millennials.

### **Fears About Not Meeting Expectations**

Just as they defined their own expectations for adulthood, Millennials worry about not meeting these expectations. Similar to a fear of failure, respondents mentioned concerns and anxieties centering on not reaching their own goals for adulthood. Their fears relate directly to their expectations regarding employment, finances, personal goals, and success.

#### *Finding a Job*

Importantly, not all respondents were in the process of looking for a job at the time of the interview. Several older respondents were already employed while others who were younger were

more concerned with their college experience. Catherine described how, as a junior in college, she was still “comfortably removed... I don’t feel I have to worry about that yet so I’m not.” However, most of those respondents who were not already established in their chosen field – including younger respondents – mentioned concerns and anxieties about finding a job they will enjoy and that will allow them to live comfortably. Perhaps as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, several respondents were worried about the job market. Michael commented, “we were hearing the unemployment rate is really high, it’s hard for college graduates to find jobs.” Similarly, Amanda acknowledged: “I feel that not being able to find a job is a scary reality.”

Beyond merely finding a job, Millennials place great value in finding work that is meaningful and about which they are passionate: “I want to be passionate about whatever I do. I don’t want to just have a nine-to-five boring office job” (Priya, 22). Michael conceded that he does not “need to love my first job” but values employment that will act as “a good career stepping stone.” Extending from their social engagement, Millennials place as much emphasis on finding meaningful work as they do on earning a good salary, although having more criteria adds to the difficulty and anxiety of finding a job. Ashley described how her numerous interests make choosing a job difficult:

[I am worried about] getting a stable job. Not just working somewhere but getting a job that I am passionate about, that does well enough for me that I can work there as long as I wanted, like that could be my career for life. I think there is a lot of pressure to have one job in your life and then that be it. So finding that one thing and liking it is hard because there are a bunch of choices. I have such diverse interests that it makes it really hard.

Her confrontation of the infinite choice paradox is a common experience for many Millennials who are fearful of choosing the “wrong” life path. Despite anxieties about choosing the wrong beginning, the open-endedness of modernity allows for change at any life stage. Victoria, although employed at a large financial firm, described beginning to look for careers that would enable her to utilize her degrees in social welfare and ethnic studies. Although she did not dislike her job, she felt it did not allow her to “change the world” and described herself as undergoing a “quarter life crisis.” Her

experiences, as well as those of others, imply a state of constant flux and raise the question of when the transitional period will end, a question held by many of the respondents themselves.

### *Financial Concerns*

As emerging adulthood is a life stage centered around becoming independent – particularly financially independent – respondents understandably had concerns and anxieties about their finances. Aditi commented that, throughout college, money was “a really stressful thing” and Amanda emphasized that money is the most stressful part of her life. Victoria described how, as she gets older, she becomes more worried about managing her student loans and buying a house. Although not yet prepared to do so, she mentioned “when I’m negotiating my salary or thinking about jobs ... I consider, is the salary something I could one day use to buy a house? And also, do I want to own a house in this location?” Location-based concerns about the cost of living were particularly prevalent in the Bay Area, which is one of the most expensive places to live in the United States. Finally, because most of the respondents grew up in middle class families, they expressed worries about not being able to achieve the same social status as their parents. Lauren commented,

I think my worries are more about that I want a home like this, that my parents have, and how the heck do I get that? Because I'm now so much more aware of the financial responsibilities of buying a house, that oh my gosh, how do people do this? And so I think that that's kind of where my worries lie. Like how do people afford to be adults?

This question – how do people afford to be adults? – was a central anxiety among Millennials.

### *Accomplishing Personal Goals*

Just as Millennials set goals for themselves, they also worried about not accomplishing those goals. Lauren summarized: “I think that I have pretty high goals for myself, like living in a house, getting married, having the wedding of my dreams, all those silly things... so I think I'm a little nervous about not being able to live up to what I've envisioned those things to be.” Not living up to expectations was a central anxiety for young adults who put extensive effort into planning for and

dreaming about their future. Josh expressed his desire to have a family, but admitted that he questions “whether or not [he] can achieve that.” Lisa also explained that, because she wanted a family by age 25, she was met with criticism from others, which in turn made her fearful that she would not be able to accomplish this goal. Some respondents also expressed concern about finding a relationship. Megan described how she worried she would never “know” when someone is “the one.”

These anxieties are reflective of Millennials’ fears of the unknown, yet present an opportunity for adaptation. Parallel to how respondents described adapting their future expectations as they grew older, many acknowledged that their path to adulthood may diverge from their goals and accepted the fluidity. Kayla stated, “I just have expectations of how I want it to be. And I’m maybe afraid that it’s not going to go that way. But I think if it didn’t, I would find another way to be happy and to become successful.” Finding happiness and success is the ultimate goal for most people, including Millennials. They hope to find a sense of purpose, become successful and independent, and accomplish goals set for themselves, but fear not living up to their own and others’ expectations and are anxious about the uncertainties the future may hold.

## CONTEXTUALIZED ANXIETY

As previously noted, Millennials as a generation are aware of and engaged with their social context. As a result of this, respondents commented on the various contextual influences on their fears and anxieties. During the summer of 2016, when the interviews were conducted, the 2016 Primary Election had just occurred and the bipartisan presidential race was beginning. Aditi expressed a fear that political changes “could impact my ability to get a job or the kind of income I could be making... It trickles down.” The location of the interviews was also significant, due to the high cost of living in the Bay Area and Northern Central Coast of California. Priya commented, “I

worry about financial stability because I don't think I will be able to afford to live in the Bay Area my whole life." Victoria also contemplated moving, joking that "if I lived in Nebraska where I could live off of a \$30,000 salary and probably buy a house, there would be less pressure." Beyond cost of living, the culture of Silicon Valley and the rest of the Bay Area is one that emphasizes financial success at all costs. Michael described how growing up among "fabulous wealth" makes people want to strive for "a similar standard of living" while Lisa added that Silicon Valley's wealth added to the intensity surrounding education and financial success. These comments indicate the extent to which anxieties and concerns are affected by historical, cultural, and geographic context and raise the issue of whether the specific concerns of Californian Millennials are the same as those of young adults from other parts of the United States.

Aditi also described in detail how opportunity structures affected her anxiety about the future. Despite the fact that college was very important to her from a young age, she was nearly prevented from attending by financial concerns. This made her question whether college would be a possibility for her. She also mentioned that, as a woman of color, her primary anxieties included things like patriarchy and oppression.<sup>10</sup> These added anxieties – financial and identity-based – are contingent on identity markers and opportunity structures, indicating that generational concerns are not the sole basis for anxiety and insecurity in the Millennial generation. A final comment on anxiety as contextualized is the time-specific nature of sociological research. Each respondent was interviewed only once, and so day-to-day emotions and recent events contributed to what was mentioned during the conversation. Jenny told me, "you're interviewing me at a very anxious time. If this had been two weeks ago, I would have been more chill." Several other respondents also mentioned things like this. Amanda was having relationship problems at college, David was

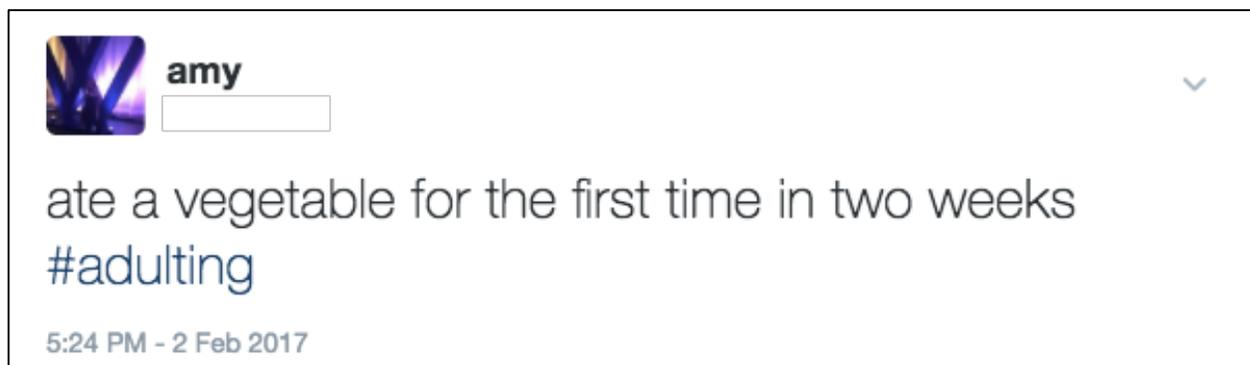
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<sup>10</sup> Aditi self-described her race/ethnicity as Bengali South Asian.

undergoing a divorce, and several others were going through times of profound transition. While I do not believe that particular events in the personal lives of some respondents dramatically altered the findings of this thesis, it is noteworthy to remember that anxiety and fear are fluid emotions felt differently in different moments. More importantly, however, the general existential nature of anxiety means that, if the interviews had been conducted two months or two years later or earlier, the respondents would describe similar anxieties caused by different factors.

“ADULTING”

**Figure 2. Popular usage of the phrase “adulting.”**



Although the title of this work, the phrase “adulting” has not yet been introduced. A slang term used by Millennials, adulting means “to behave like an adult, specifically to do the things – often mundane – that an adult is expected to do” (Merriam Webster). Popularly used in social media and in conjunction with a sense of exasperation, modern young people often jokingly express frustration with learning how “to adult.” The phrase can be used either positively or sarcastically to express pride at having accomplished a task required by adulthood (see Figure 2). Several respondents used the phrase in their interviews, including Josh, who described the “fear of having a real job. Of having to actually adult.” Converting the idea of being an adult into a verb or behavior serves to highlight the subjective nature of adulthood for Millennials. Rather than immediately

becoming an adult upon reaching a certain milestone, adulting is a process that Millennials undertake subjectively (Newman 2012).

Not quite adults yet no longer adolescents, Millennials exist in an “in-between” stage. This is the basis of Arnett’s (2000) concept of emerging adulthood, and in his first analysis of the phrase he emphasizes that emerging adults subjectively define themselves as existing between adolescence and adulthood. His findings were echoed in the interviews conducted for this thesis. Priya described how a “period of your life where you’re an adult but you don’t have all the responsibilities of being an adult” is “a Millennial thing to have.” She went on to say that this is often criticized in Millennials because older generations claim that “they just don’t grow up.” Lisa embodied this concept, saying: “I’m in this weird spot where I want to be an adult but not really. Because I don’t want to deal with life, but I want to have the fun parts of being an adult.” As perhaps the first generation to undergo this exploratory stage, Millennials have a unique understanding of the increasingly fluid boundary between adolescence and adulthood, an understanding that older generations lack.

Being the first generation to experience emerging adulthood in the de-traditionalized context of modernity means that Millennials are forced to create their own definitions of adulthood. Explained earlier in this chapter, Millennials associate adulthood with independence, but beyond this simple analysis often lack a detailed understanding of what adulting entails. Some attempted to use traditional milestones as markers: “I think that it’s these big goals, or these monumental life moments... Get married, have kids, have a second kid. Those types of things are the adulting pillars” (Lauren, 24). Others, however, searched for more subjective definitions. Megan described how she would feel like a “grown up when I feel financially – and where I am in my life stage – I can have a pet... So I feel like I’m going to be a grown up when I’m settled down in a place with a dog.” Her definition incorporated both self-sufficiency and financial stability combined with a more emotional notion of stability. Samantha’s definition of adulthood was purely subjective:

The way I see adults is, they know themselves. They've got themselves sorted out, they know what they believe in, they know what they like and don't like just because they've had that life experience. And so in high school you do what everyone else does, then you go to college and you're surrounded by different people and you realize "oh, I'm different so I'm going to emphasize that somehow." You start getting into different things and listening to music, eating new food, meeting new people. It's all new, so it's all this process of sorting out what you do and don't like. I think it's a product of where we are in the stage of life.

Beyond emotional subjectivity, Samantha's definition placed the college experience at the center because of the opportunity it presents for exploration. The diverse notions of adulthood underline the subjectivity of the Millennial generation. While each individual may understand adulting differently, they agree that adulthood is achieved not when a certain milestone is completed but by when one "feels like" an adult. The emotional emphasis, however, means that adulthood becomes far more difficult to define or establish.

### **Am I an Adult?**

Removing life milestones as markers for adulthood left many respondents to question whether or not they are adults or ever will feel like adults. Isabel described how "the older I got, the more I [realized that] reaching adulthood is not magic, you don't suddenly know all the answers." Aaron conceded that his expectations of adulthood were "nothing like [the reality]. I thought we'd have everything together. I thought life would make sense... when I was young I just thought it would click." The disenchantment that confronts childhood dreams of adulthood independence is a disconcerting reality for anyone growing older. The question remains, however, when a generation that values exploration, individualism, and subjectivity will become "settled" or "fixed" enough to fit into the traditional preconceptions of adulthood that continue to pervade their expectations. Lauren, who represented one of the most traditionally "adult-like" respondents because she was financially independent, held a graduate degree, and was employed full-time, confronted the difficulties of subjectively defining adulthood:

I think that I really started to think about these things [becoming an adult] when I was finishing my undergrad and realizing "Oh my god I'm an adult." I've always envisioned

people who graduate college as being these old adult people, and now that's me, and that's very weird. I still don't feel old enough to be a college graduate, I still don't feel old enough to be a teacher. I don't think I look old enough, I don't think I am old enough, because I always thought that those people were older, or looked older. I really am those people now. I really am an adult now.

That even someone who, legally and perhaps objectively, could be considered an adult maintains the self-perception of not “feeling like” an adult demonstrates the extent to which subjective and emotional markers of adulthood can supersede objective, financial, or traditional measures.

## CONCLUSION

As children, Millennials held expectations for adulthood that centered around being independent. As they grew older, reality forced them to adjust their expectations for the future. These expectations are accompanied by specific goals and visions of success, often including self-sufficiency, financial stability, and personal happiness. Along with expectations, all of the respondents, due to their status as emerging adults, had concerns, anxieties, or fears about the future. Many mentioned a fear of the unknown or fears about not meeting their own expectations for adulthood, such as finding meaningful work or becoming financially secure.

Millennials, as a generation of youth, are not necessarily unique from previous generations in having anxieties and fears for the future. Lewis Feuer (1969) describes the “nameless malaise” suffered by young people in the 1960s, a psychological state of loneliness and alienation and a form of existential anxiety (Feuer 1969:508, 510). However, Feuer goes on to say that, in the United States, younger generations in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century shared the same values as older generations, and worked to follow in their footsteps and become leaders in society (Feuer 1969:327, 335). In contrast, Millennials are a generation heavily influenced by the social changes brought by modernity. Very few respondents expressed a desire to follow in the exact footsteps of their parents. Ultimately, Millennials lack defined pathways into adulthood. Partly because traditional pathways to adulthood

are no longer available and partly because Millennials desire individuality and uniqueness, young adults are forging individual pathways into adulthood. Their undefined expectations bring uncertainty and anxiety, and without a frame of reference to guide them, Millennials must reflexively form an understanding of “adulting” through comparison with others.

## CHAPTER 4. SOCIAL MEDIA, COMPARISON & INSECURITY

Parallel to their fears, concerns, and anxieties, Millennials inevitably experience insecurities, often the result of comparing themselves to others. Because identity – particularly in emerging adulthood – is defined socially, identity formation requires comparison with others on the basis of personal experiences and progression through the life course. The increased reflexivity of modern life and of the Millennial generation also initiates comparison, and in this way comparison is built into the identity-formation and coming of age processes of modern young adults and is a normal part of social life. With the advent and expansion of social media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the extent to which it represents time-space distantiation and the mediated experience of reality (Giddens 1991), opportunities for comparison have dramatically increased as we become exposed to more information about other people without having to interact with them in person. Furthermore, although insecurities existed before social media was created, the constant comparison enabled by social media can exacerbate envy and insecurity. This chapter discusses the Millennial generation's use of social media and experiences with comparison and how social media allows for new and unique forms of comparison. I also analyze the insecurities of Millennials and their social basis, particularly how emerging adulthood is a time of working to overcome these insecurities.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Most respondents admitted to using social media, particularly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, multiple times each a day. Some emphasized that they used it extremely often and spent hours checking their accounts, while others mentioned they did not have or did not enjoy social media. Priya described how although other members of her generation use technology “so much,” a behavior criticized by older generations, she actively limited her exposure to social media:

“it’s a personal choice...I don’t think that [social media is] stupid or pointless, I think you can definitely do a lot of good things with any social media platform, and you can also do pointless or even bad things with it.” Her acknowledgement that technology can promote both good and bad behavior is an opinion held by other respondents. Ashley described how social media is a necessity “if you want to be close with people and have that facet of social interaction.” Some respondents, although they themselves used technology, disliked how social media becomes an obligation, which in turn makes it addicting and almost compulsory. Matthew emphatically stated that social media is “absolutely a bad thing” because every day when he wakes up, “I have to check all social media. Then I can start my day.”

Although they saw social media as necessary or obligatory, most respondents did believe that it made them more connected. Megan described Facebook as a way to “find out what’s going on,” while Priya enjoyed being able to share aspects of her life with others: “I think it is good to be able to connect or keep up with people. Sometimes if I want to share something about my life, it’s nice to have people respond to that and know that I’m not just throwing something out there, people like it and are responding to it.” This type of positive feedback is made easier by platforms that create compilations of life highlights, although having access to this information does not completely supplement interpersonal connection. Victoria mentioned that social media can often make her feel lonely because “I could scroll through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and know what everyone’s doing, yet I talk to my best friend via text most of the time and see them only once every two weeks.” The disconnection and connection paradox is a component of social media use relevant to Millennials, who “spend more of their leisure time alone than any persons except the elderly” (Arnett 2000:474). While social media allows them to feel connected to and knowledgeable about others, it can be an isolating experience.

Beyond staying connected with friends and family, Millennials use social media to become politically aware. Priya described how because she was “politically active in college...a lot of my Facebook friends are also like that and share interesting articles,” a sentiment that Catherine echoed. David understood Twitter as a “more modern 24-hour news channel.” However, social media can change how news and the political climate are perceived:

People have access to these tools that allow for broad citizen journalism-type things. Anyone can be a news broadcaster if they want to be because they have the tools to. It's no longer just word of mouth. We have phones, everyone has a camera and everyone is able to take part and share this information. It makes the world a really small place and even though the world is huge, those events that are happening become even bigger for us...It's not like you see it in the newspaper and then you put down the newspaper and continue with your day. Your newspaper is with you all the time in five different social networks that you spend time on anyways. So it's always there. (Samantha, 20)

Constant exposure to world news can be exhausting, especially given the tendency to focus on negative events, and social media can bring the concerns and worries of others to our attention, resulting in the mediated experience of global anxiety. At the same time that social media allows Millennials to stay connected to their social networks and the world around them, the increased connection and exposure can have negative side effects such as loneliness and anxiety.

### **Curating a Social Media Presence**

Social media is often used to provide a window into someone's life. However, this window allows others to see only a controlled image, as anything visible on social media has been uploaded in order to be seen. Michael described this as “curated... you have to realize it's not someone's real life. It's the best facets of their life that they've decided to display.” Victoria added, “you only see the best part of everyone's lives, you see their travel pictures, dinner pictures... but no one is posting a selfie of me at home alone with my cat on a Friday night.” Curating an image of oneself is a distinctly modern idea (Goffman 1959). However, the creation of an online persona allows for one's self-presentation to exist separately – temporally and spatially – from the individual herself, further distancing this persona from the actual individual it is purposefully designed to represent. The

curation and hyper-selection of what is shown to others via social media then raises the question of authenticity:

There's this whole, who you are on Facebook, is that who you are? People cultivate these Instagram personas and Facebook personas where it's like we want to be the coolest, best, smartest, most successful version of ourselves, and we want everyone to see that version... And of course you want other people to see the best version of you. (Megan, 24)

Some respondents, including Amanda, believed that this type of curation is fake or deceiving, but others, like Catherine, emphasized that it is not a trick:

I wouldn't say it's a façade because for me façade implies deception, and I think most of the people I interact with on social media understand the way those various social media accounts work. And it's not that we're trying to trick other people into thinking that our lives are the ones that we put up on social media as much as *that's what social media is for*. (emphasis added)

Whether or not there exists a mutual understanding about the purpose of social media being to create an idealized image of oneself, most respondents did admit to wanting to control how they are perceived online. Megan described wanting “to make sure that what people see about me is something that shows good character and shows who I am,” while Ashley admitted she wants to “make myself look good on social media. I want to look like I have my life together and I want to look a certain way ... so that people think well of you.” Perhaps bordering on deception, Matthew described how he used social media to show his family and friends the positive side of his athletic career: although he had an unsuccessful race, he explained how he posted a picture on Facebook of himself “on top of the mountain with a view of the whole lake in the background. Posting that picture with a smile on my face... kind of made me happy because I was able to see myself happy.” Matthew's example demonstrates how the curation of a social media presence, while often directed outward, can also affect subjective perception and self-esteem.

### **Generational Differences in Social Media Use**

A result of being exposed to new technologies since childhood, Millennials understand their generation through technology use and comfort with social media. Although members of nearly all

generations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are comfortable to a certain extent with social media, Millennials developed a fluency with and reliance on social media very early in life. Social media use, however, brings with it an added list of expected behaviors, which Nicole describes as “social media pressure.” She adds that “Millennials are unique and one of the first generations growing up with that kind of social media scrutiny.” Because of this pressure and scrutiny, Millennials place value in their social media presence and see it as an important part of their lives. Although social media is valuable to Millennials, their use of technology (and perhaps overuse) is often criticized by older generations. Matthew, although he described his own technology use as extensive to the point of being disruptive, echoed these criticisms:

Look at the generation of us now compared to how our parents were. With how connected we are with social media...I went out to dinner a week ago and there was this boyfriend and girlfriend...sitting pretty much right next to me... [They were] just consistently on their phones, they barely made any eye contact with each other...They've [Millennials] gotten so attached to social media.

Criticisms of Millennials for being “glued to their phones” are ubiquitous, and this essay does not aim to counteract that stereotype, but rather to emphasize that the technology and social media use of Millennials hold value within their social context.<sup>11</sup> Social media gives Millennials a new way to “express” themselves and allows them to “see how people react and respond to you” (Samantha, 20). In this way, technology becomes a means of interacting with the social world.

The advent of social media also affects how people measure themselves against others, which can lead to self-esteem and mental health problems that were not experienced by older generations. The rest of this chapter aims to analyze the influence of social media on comparison, and the thoughts of two respondents presented here outline these new concerns for Millennials.

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<sup>11</sup> Despite most criticisms of technology use being centered on Millennials, one could make the argument that older generations are equally likely to be “glued to their phones” or overly reliant on social media as a means of communication. Further study is necessary to examine generational differences in social media use.

Priya described how social media pushes Millennials to compare lifestyles and life experiences, a new marker of social status:

The Baby Boomer generation and Yuppies from Generation X, it was like “keeping up with the Joneses,” who has the bigger car, who has the nicer house, who has the bigger TV. Because that was the tangible way that you could show off to people. I think for our generation it’s who went to Coachella, who travelled to Southeast Asia by themselves. Everything is less about material possessions and about who is having the most amazing experiences... you know everyone on social media will see that you went to Coachella or you did something else really cool.

Because Millennials value experiences and exploration, these highlights are prominently displayed on social media to indicate social status. However, as social media demonstrates only the best parts of people’s lives, it can be easy to take these curated personas at face value. Lauren described how Millennials are the first generation to struggle with comparing themselves not merely against their peers but against idealized, perfected versions of their peers:

You never post a photo that you look ugly in, you never post a photo of you crying over something that happened, you never post a status about losing your job or being totally broke and living off macaroni and cheese. You don't post things like that. And so being able to prep these new young minds to [the fact that] social media only presents the good things, and to keep that in perspective. So I think that social media has a huge influence over mental health.

Her comments indicate that comparison through social media can lead to mental health problems such as insecurity or low self-esteem. Significantly, these comments highlight the extent to which comparison through social media is a generational issue.

## COMPARISON

Comparison is a natural part of social life. Because identity is established reflexively, we understand ourselves in relation to others, and respondents seemed to acknowledge the ubiquity of comparison. Catherine conceded, “when I’m interacting with someone, whether consciously or not, I am always making comparisons to them.” However, respondents also realized that excessive comparison can be detrimental: “the important thing is to not let it take over your life and think

about it too much” (Priya, 22). Respondents mostly compared themselves to people they saw as equals, but degrees of comparison were affected by individual identity markers. For example, Megan described how her anxiety made her prone to comparison: “I’ve always set a really high standard for myself and always compared myself to other people. I’m always afraid that other people might think I’m bad or weird or not smart or not successful.” Oppositely, Lauren stated that her “self image and security with myself” in many spheres of her life are comfortable, and so she does not compare herself to others. However, she went on to say, “in my profession that I’m just getting started on,” she does compare herself to her coworkers. While I will later argue that comparison can lead to insecurity, the process works in both directions. Respondents often compared aspects of themselves about which they were insecure. Levels of comparison can also change over time, as Aditi exemplified. During her first semester of college, Aditi described comparing her social life to that of her friends involved in Greek life, but stated, “now that a few years have passed I’m totally over it.”

### **Comparison via Social Media**

Social media makes comparison easier because it provides ample opportunity to compare via a plethora of platforms. This is new to the Millennial generation, as Emi described, “when my parents were younger they didn’t have [social media].” Respondents agreed that social media affects interpersonal comparison. Lauren described how it increased access: social media “adds a very accessible way to see what other people are doing and you’re not. A very up front way of comparing yourself, comparing and contrasting the things you haven’t done with the things that other people have.” As a component of access, Samantha described how social media is removed from a particular temporal or spatial encounter with another person:

Well, on social media there's more time to really absorb and let something seep in without having the full story. In person I think it's a little easier to get a more dynamic view of someone... You get a more dynamic perspective in real life, you can come to a stronger conclusion in that moment, whereas on social media you really have time to let things wash over you and let people's photos and thoughts and whatever dictate your perspective of them. Which is exactly what it's meant to do.

Her comment that social media is “meant to” allow this type of comparison relates to the creation of online personas that amalgamate the (mostly positive) highlights of someone’s life and display an idealized version of that person for others to see. Ashley added that online comparison breeds competition because it is harder to see someone as “a person and not something I am trying to be or not be like.” Because online interactions and the viewing of social media occurs in private, social media “dehumanizes the experience ... because you’re not looking them face to face, so it’s a little bit easier to compare yourself positively or negatively to them” (Thomas, 21). While comparison via social media is a form of interpersonal communication, its removal from traditional forms of interaction distinguishes it from other forms of comparison built into social life.

That social media primarily portrays the positive aspects of people’s lives can incite jealousy, particularly if the viewer compares their life – with its ups and downs – to the other person’s idealized, perfected life. Jacqueline articulated this:

I think it's hard to realize that, especially in our generation, social media is people's highlights. It's all the good things in their life and they're going to broadcast that. They're not going to broadcast the bloopers, the behind the scenes bad stuff. You only see the positive, you don't see any of the negative, so you have this false image that their life is perfect because you know everything in your life, you know the good and the bad, but you only see the good in someone else's life and it's hard for you to think that they have real problems and suffer the same way you do.

Although many respondents seemed aware of this effect of social media, Nicole added that merely understanding that social media focuses on the positives is not always enough to prevent comparison: “even if you tell yourself it's an idealized version of the person, it's so hard not to compare yourself... Even if you remind yourself that is not necessarily how their life is going... it is easier to compare and forget about [the context].” Social media is optimized to incite comparison, and even acknowledging its biases and distortions cannot always prevent comparisons from taking place. Furthermore, because comparison is so ingrained in daily life, it is an almost inescapable component of social existence.

### *Trying Not to Compare*

Although difficult, several respondents mentioned that they actively try to not compare themselves to others on social media. One strategy involved streamlining their social media accounts so that they are no longer exposed to accounts that would instigate detrimental comparison.

Amanda stated how she “got to a point” where she stopped caring what others were doing because “it made me feel worse to think that they were doing these super cool things.” She acknowledged, “it’s just an act sometimes, so I decided to step away.” While social media often makes comparison easier, it also provides the option to “step away” from or filter certain interactions. Priya mentioned “unfollow[ing] certain people because they make their lives seem great and it’s not fun to feel like my life is not as cool as theirs,” and Samantha echoed that “we choose who we follow and we choose what we see.” Because comparison can be so difficult to avoid, Millennials use the option to censor their social media accounts to minimize opportunities for negative comparisons.

Other respondents described “taking [social media] with a grain of salt” because “everyone shows you what they want you to see” (Casey, 25). Keeping in mind that social media is curated helped several respondents to not compare themselves. Kayla mentioned that she does not “believe half the things or people I see on social media” and added, “there’s no reason to compare myself to something I don’t know is real.” Josh also described not believing others’ social media profiles, and added that he enjoys seeing “how people present themselves” (see Goffman 1959). Beyond not believing, Victoria described trying to “look at the big picture,” and acknowledged that when she sees someone on social media she does not know “what their struggles are, what it took for them to get there, so there’s no point comparing.” Victoria’s desire to see beyond what is presented on social media again echoes Millennials’ awareness that social media cannot be taken at face value. Importantly, however, although several respondents had developed strategies to avoid certain aspects of social media or filter their perceptions, many also emphasized that it is difficult to step

away from social media. Furthermore, time and age also play a role in comparison over social media; many of the older respondents mentioned that although in high school or early college they were more likely to compare, over time they stopped, perhaps due to the development of various strategies to prevent negative comparison.

### **Comparing Lives**

Respondents were most likely to broadly compare their lives – including life trajectory, lifestyle, social life, etc. – to others’ lives. Amanda admitted that although she should not be comparing herself, she is “constantly trying to see where I can fit in.” This comparison is mostly based off of perception rather than complete knowledge: respondents compared how they perceived their own lives to how they perceived others’ lives. The two main categories for life comparison included life stages and lifestyle. Life stage comparison directly related to anxieties and insecurities about coming of age. Millennials want to know if their lives are following the “right” path or if they are taking the right steps and they attempt to answer these questions by comparing their life paths to those of their peers. This can foster insecurities, as described by Nicole:

I felt like I wasn’t doing what I needed to be doing to prepare for the future. Everyone seems to have their life together and know what they wanted to do with their life. And they seem to be able to go out and have fun at the same exact time. They just seem like they have it all together and my life is just a mess.

Her concerns that “everyone else” was moving forward while she was behind was echoed by many respondents, and epitomizes life path comparison. The second category for comparison, lifestyle, involved comparing vacations, material possessions, and social activities.

### *Life Paths*

The exploratory nature of emerging adulthood often means that peers of the same age are in very different places in their lives. Because Millennials – like all individuals – understand their position in the world relative to others, the fluidity of this life stage can make comparison difficult or insecurity-inducing. Some respondents described comparing their completion of life checkpoints

and milestones. Thomas described that “when other people are announcing life milestones that I haven’t gotten to yet,” he often feels insecure or jealous regardless of whether that milestone is important to him. Josh described invisible checkpoints that allowed him to compare “where people close to me were at this point in their lives.” Although he acknowledged that his life trajectory may be different from that of others, he often feels that he is “also supposed to be at that point at that time.”

Another form of comparison involved jealousy of those who had a certain or fixed path. Catherine described a friend who “knows exactly what she’s doing ... she has it all worked out in a way that I don’t.” Although she did not want the same life as her friend, Catherine admitted to wanting that same security and knowledge. Isabel also admitted to being jealous of a friend who was following a “clear path” of becoming a nurse. In contrast, Isabel described herself as “just floating along.” Emerging adulthood is by nature a fluid and unstable life stage. Modern young people are not required to follow a specific pathway into adulthood, and so understand their own journey in relation to that of others.

### *Lifestyle*

Lifestyle comparison is not unique to emerging adulthood nor to Millennials, and centers around the idea of “I wish I was doing that” (Casey, 25). Megan also summarized her tendency to compare lifestyles: “some of my peers are doing all this cool stuff all the time, and I’m in my sweatpants watching TV and knitting.” Several respondents mentioned comparing when their peers went on vacation or traveled, while others compared financial status. Aditi described how one of her college friend’s family owned an island; after finding that out, “whenever I went on Facebook, [I just thought], wow, I wish I could go to Aruba for spring break.” Some respondents who were in college mentioned comparing their transition to college with that of their friends from high school. Catherine admitted being jealous when her friends “were having much more traditional college

experiences” than she was. Lifestyle comparison is exacerbated by social media: “social media makes it really easy to start comparing what you’re doing personally – your vacations, your weekend plans, whatever you’re doing with your friends on a random Wednesday night – compared to other people” (Thomas, 21). However, social media tends to show only the ideal versions – the successes, vacations, and outings with friends – of people’s lives, hence skewing comparison and worsening insecurities.

### **Comparing “Success”**

As a component of life comparison, Millennials also compare their own “success,” subjectively defined, with that of others. Comparing levels of success is directly related to Millennials anxieties and concerns about being successful. Respondents mentioned comparing academic success and employment. Thomas described comparing “what grade you got on the exam, what overall grade you got in the class, and what your GPA is for the concentration” with other students in his same major, and went on to describe how academic comparisons transitioned into comparisons about “future plans and goals,” mentioning that “it’s very easy to rank yourself along those lines.” Aditi also remembered having to justify her lower GPA to other students who questioned why she was “missing out on opportunities,” while Michael described comparison regarding “who’s getting better internships, who seems to be doing the best for themselves.” Understanding what it means to be successful is as much a reflexive process as it is subjective. Millennials inevitably compare themselves to their peers as a way of measuring their own success and judging what is normative.

### **Comparison is Not Always Negative**

Up to this point, most of the comparison described has had a negative connotation, leading respondents to feel insecure. However, comparison is not always negative. Some respondents described comparison as improving their self-esteem, causing them to feel happy for others, or motivating them to do more. Thomas described how, “compared to a lot of my friend group, I’m

feeling pretty good about where I am with my own personal goals and my personal situation,” and so comparison often left him “feeling good about myself compared to others.” His thoughts were echoed by Isabel, Michael, and Casey, who conceded that comparison can “make me feel a little bit better about myself.” While this type of comparison may help respondents to feel better, it does not necessarily represent an overall positive experience. After all, comparing oneself to someone else for an ego boost still equates comparison with judgment and competition.

More positively, Aaron explained how his comfort with his current social position helps him understand that not “too many people have it better than me.” Antonio added that, as he has gotten older, “that childish way of comparing each other got away from me,” leading him to “feel a sense of happiness towards them [his peers].” For him, comparison is not really comparison but a way of appreciating the different life paths his peers have taken. Comparison can also motivate Millennials to achieve more or improve their own lives. Kayla described that comparison “motivates me to work harder or figure out a way where I can do something like [what others are doing].” Jenny also emphasized the idea that “we could do all of [the things others are doing],” and saw comparison as a way of understanding what is possible. Samantha understood being “jealous of people’s careers or where they go to school, what they’ve achieved” as a positive that could “push you to do the same.” The motivational aspect of comparison is part of its normative function, and demonstrates again how Millennials engage reflexively with their social networks.

## COMPETITION

Comparison at its most dramatic can become competition. Importantly, not all respondents believed that comparison expressed itself as competition in their lives. Aaron commented that he does not want to “do anything better than anyone because I want everybody to be doing their best and everybody to be happy with where they are,” while Casey criticized the idea of “sorting

accomplishments.” Some Millennials, however, do feel that competition is a significant component of their lives. Lisa exemplified this attitude:

Everything is a competition. Everything can be made into a competition. If it's grades, if it's who you support in the presidential race. I don't know how it can be made into a competition, but people make it. How many likes do you get on your profile picture, how many likes you get on your Instagram, how many followers do you have? What's your ratio of followers to likes? What grades you have. How much money your parents make. If you have a nice social life. If you go to parties. Everything is measured and competed against, and I think it's part of the reason why everyone is so stressed out. It's not even just one thing. It's everything. Everything is a competition.

Lauren simplified this, saying, “there is always this unspoken ‘can I do better, can I have more than someone else?’” This form of comparison is motivational to the point of being competitive.

As a means of explaining the competition she saw in her generation, Megan described how “there’s always competition between peers... If you’re in an individualist society, which we are, and a capitalist society, that’s how it works.” Her main point is that competition is not unique to Millennials but rather a result of American social structures. Catherine also ascribed a social explanation to the sense of competition she experienced: “certainly women in general, and young women in general, are competitive in terms of how they look, and that's a really shitty part of the patriarchy.” While motivational comparison was seen as a positive, competition was ultimately negative. Nicole described how competition “ends up making me feel awful.” As a means of combatting competition, she described trying “to stay away from feeling like I’m competing with people and [trying to emphasize that] they have their assets and I have mine.” However, Nicole clarified that only recently, as a 21-year-old, has she been able to avoid competition, indicating that perhaps Millennials become less competitive as they grow older or shift to competing around variables other than general life trajectory.

### **Competition on Social Media**

Although competition itself – and even competition on social media – is not unique to the Millennial generation, they are the first to engage in competition via social media throughout the

coming of age process, a life stage particularly vulnerable to comparison and competition. Respondents described competing about followers on social media and the number of “likes” received on a post. Although in retrospect they acknowledged the frivolity of this type of competition, it was sometimes described as being, at some point, important to them. Social media also makes competition easier, as one has the ability to “show off” not only in person but online as well, thereby reaching a broader audience. Lauren described how competition via social media is “unspoken” and “passive aggressive,” going on to say, “why else would you post a picture of your brand new car on Instagram” if not to show off. Jacqueline cited this exact same behavior, describing how on social media “there’s so much competition. It’s vain, like if you get a new car you’d post a picture of it, so it’s definitely a form of competition.” Just as comparison can be made worse through social media, competition also occurs online.

## INSECURITIES

Often as a result of comparison, insecurities simultaneously exist in a social context and relate directly to individual identity. David explained, “one’s insecurities are constant and make up who they are,” and other respondents described how although many of their own insecurities were shared by others, the exact combination is unique to them. Josh described how insecurities – more so than comparison or competition – are incredibly personal:

If you have a problem that fits in the palm of your hands, and then you meet someone that has a problem that requires two hands, it makes your problem seem small. But as soon as they leave, your problem is now the biggest problem in the room. Then you meet someone who has to carry the problems on their shoulders and now your problems seem like they are wrong, then they leave and then your problems are again the biggest problems in the room. And so, I’m sure there are some people out there who can keep that all in perspective. But for me it always comes down to the problem that I have and the problems I have when no one else is around.

Insecurities are experienced in private, and while respondents were much more willing to openly discuss their fears, concerns, and anxieties, insecurities were more difficult to express. Josh went on

to say that he is “always searching for proof that everyone else is struggling too.” This attitude was shared by several other respondents, who remarked that when they did share their insecurities with others they often realized they were not alone in feeling this way. Josh described this as “validation,” but went on to say that merely knowing that someone is also insecure about something does not make that insecurity go away.

Several respondents, such as Antonio, emphasized that they were not insecure: “I have never felt insecure in my life.” Hinting at the importance of other identity factors in the Millennial experience, more male respondents described not being insecure than female respondents. This is perhaps due to the gender disparity in struggles with body image. Other respondents, such as Ashley, described being very insecure: “I have always been pretty insecure.” Levels of insecurity, for many respondents, also changed over time. Lauren described how only “later in college” did she realize “that it’s okay to just be me.” Overcoming insecurities, in many ways, is part of the coming of age process, particularly because adolescence is a time of great insecurity. The insecurities of Millennials paralleled their anxieties, fears, and concerns as well as the things about which they tended to compare. Additionally, although not mentioned in other contexts, many respondents mentioned body image as a primary insecurity.

### **Insecurities about Life Path and Lifestyle**

Just as they compare their life path and lifestyle to those of others, Millennials can become insecure about the progression of their lives. Josh described how “everyone goes about feeling like everyone has it more together than them,” and so the self-perception of being “behind” in one’s life path can lead to insecurity. David described how he is insecure about “where I am in life currently ... I’m 27 and still searching for that feeling of home.” Similarly, Jenny expressed insecurity that she is older and only just now starting on her career. She described being jealous of others because “where I am now, they were a couple years ago.” Other respondents had insecurities related to their

lifestyle. Isabel, Priya, and Megan all mentioned insecurities about not having a large group of friends, citing an expectation that having a large group of friends with whom to do activities is the social norm. Millennials were also insecure about whether they were having the “right” experiences. Rather than a moral concept, the idea of doing the “right” thing implies that there is a correct pathway into adulthood. Although Millennials were emphatic that diversity and heterogeneity are positives, there is a lingering belief that there is a “right” or correct way of being an adult; comparing themselves to others, Millennials often felt insecure that they were not following this pathway.

### **Insecurities about “Success”**

Again paralleling their anxieties, concerns, and comparison, Millennials are insecure about not achieving enough or not being successful. Emi described how she is “always comparing myself to everyone ... it’s instilled in me that I’m not going to be successful.” Her fear of not achieving success made Emi insecure to the point where she felt it was holding her back. Samantha also explained her insecurities about not being successful, instigated by comparison:

I was on LinkedIn today and I was looking at what the other interns were doing, similar things as me and I'm like, holy shit, these people's lives, how do they even achieve that in 25 years? I don't even get it. So I immediately felt inferior to them. But then I had to remind myself, I'm in the same place as them, I'm doing the same job as them and I'm just as good as they are. I'm just good in a different way. And so you have to think about that. It's so easy to look at what other people have and what you don't have but you have to think about what you have already, what you bring to the table.

Her coping mechanism – reminding herself of her own accomplishments – was one used by other respondents to combat insecurity. Importantly, however, her experiences on social media led to comparison which, in turn, led to insecurity. As a final component of insecurities about success, some respondents explained that they were insecure about their financial security. Jacqueline mentioned that, although her parents provided for her, she remained insecure about her financial status as a result of comparison.

### **Body Image**

Although only tangentially related to the coming of age process, concerns over body image were one of the most frequently cited insecurities among respondents. Body image insecurities were also felt more strongly by female respondents than by male respondents, and many cited various social factors as the basis for the gender disparity. Amanda felt that “girls are insecure all the time,” and admitted that she, too, cared about what others’ thought of her physical appearance. Lisa, who struggled with an eating disorder for over a year, also described having “body issues” and “body dysmorphia that never goes away.” Several respondents attributed body insecurity to social media and the increase in exposure to popular culture. Megan felt that her “body image issues ... were exacerbated by our access to pictures, which is enabled by the media.” Michael explained how through the media “you’re exposed to more idealized bodies and idealized lives.” Ashley echoed these thoughts:

It’s definitely easy to feel insecure because there is so much going on on social media and so many people doing crazy things. It’s very common for normal people – not celebrities or in magazines – for normal people to Photoshop themselves and do things like that. That’s crazy. That you can see a ton of pictures of your friends and they can’t even be accurate.

The manipulation of physical appearance through technology is yet another component of social media’s tendency to create an idealized image, which can in turn lead to insecurity. There is substantial research on the impact of social media on young women’s body image, but this thesis only offers some brief commentary.

While respondents were aware of the impact of social media, they also attributed body image insecurity to other social factors such as “internalized misogyny and the... capitalist patriarchy” (Catherine, 20), again reflecting Millennials’ awareness of social influences. As emerging adults grow older, they are able to overcome their adolescent insecurities; for young women, growing older also leads to increased security in their physical appearance. Isabel described how over the past few years, she has “spent a lot of time teaching myself to not put a lot of personal stock in the way that I look or in appealing to other people.” Lauren also mentioned that as she got older she was able to love

her body. Body image, however, remains a challenge for many young women (and some young men), and can be worsened by social media.

### **Overcoming Insecurities**

As previously mentioned, emerging adulthood is a time of overcoming the insecurities of adolescence. Most respondents – especially older respondents – described an age component to their insecurities. Lauren stated, “in high school and middle school, when you’re still developing how you are, I think there was a lot of pressure to see how other people were doing it and to be like them. But I don’t feel like that any more.” Similarly, Emi described how with time she started “losing some of the insecurities.” Jacqueline also explained how she was also able to come to terms with her insecurities:

From elementary school to the middle of high school, I was just insecure about who I was. My personality, my mannerisms, everything. I was just like “oh my god I don't like myself.” If I met me, I don't think I'd like me. It was so scary to say that out loud and realize that, but finally I just came to terms [with it].

While comparison seemed to persist even as respondents became older, insecurities lessened over time. Emerging adulthood is a period of exploration and personal growth, and a large facet of this personal growth involves overcoming the insecurities and fears of earlier transitional periods.

Another means of overcoming insecurities, and a perspective also learned over time, included trying to see “the bigger picture.” Respondents mentioned that although it can seem like other people are perfect, oftentimes their public presentation is not indicative of the entire person and their struggles. Amanda admitted that seeing people who “have everything all together” often made her feel jealous or insecure, but she started to wonder whether “those people really don’t have it all together ... [because] everyone has their faults or insecurities.” This realization allowed her to limit her comparison to a “quick second” before she was able to overcome her insecurity. Casey commented on a similar concept: “I think when you're younger it's easier to be more insecure because you assume that everyone else is perfect. As you get older you try to see that everyone’s

insecure and everyone has something they're proud of and something they're embarrassed by.” The idea that getting older will allow Millennials to see beyond the positive-skewedness of social media and to develop more secure senses of selves is important to understanding the temporal nature of their present anxieties, insecurities, and concerns. This does not mean, however, that once they are older they will no longer have insecurities, fears or concerns, but rather emphasizes the social nature of their present worries.

## CONCLUSION

Beyond anxieties, insecurities also play a role in emerging adulthood. These insecurities are often the result of comparison, an important component of reflexivity and natural part of social life that can be exacerbated and made easier by social media, which is curated to reflect an idealized version of the self. Millennials most often compared traits that reflected their anxieties and concerns, primarily lifestyles, life paths, and achievements. This comparison often resulted in insecurities that paralleled respondents' anxieties and concerns (specifically life path, lifestyle, and success). Body image was an added insecurity, which respondents often attributed to social causes such as patriarchal social structures and exposure to hyper-perfected social media and celebrity culture. As emerging adulthood represents a period in the life course in which young people understand themselves in relation to others, the insecurities in this life stage will lessen as young adults develop more secure identities and senses of self. Amidst this transitional phase, young adults utilize emotion-based coping strategies to overcome their insecurities, fears, anxieties, and concerns.

## CHAPTER 5. COPING STRATEGIES IN A THERAPEUTIC CULTURE

Eva Illouz (2007) and Christopher Lasch's (1979) theories of modernity emphasize the creation of a therapeutic society in which emotions are of primary importance. Millennials were raised in this modern, therapeutic society, and so their attitudes regarding their own anxieties, stresses, fears, and concerns inevitably follow a therapeutic model. Millennials value their own emotions and the emotions of others, and many believe in the importance of "talking about" emotions. As a result of their emphasis on emotions, Millennials' strategies for coping with their fears and anxieties are often emotion-centric. In addition to talking about their emotions with others, Millennials also engage in other coping strategies that involve the development of an emotional conscientiousness, an awareness of and willingness to accommodate their emotional needs.

Although this is perhaps a direct result of the cultural influence of psychological talk therapy, it also represents a generational gap between modern young people and older generations: many respondents believed that members of younger generations are more comfortable openly discussing emotions. However, parents of Millennials valued the emotions of their children, often citing emotional happiness as their sole hope for their children's adult future. Millennials, particularly those of upper and upper middle classes, grew up sheltered and protected by parents that wanted them to be "happy." These same young people often continue to be protected – particularly financially – by their parents, who were described as providing a "safety net." In this chapter, I will outline the coping strategies of Millennials and the extent to which they are centered on emotions and built upon parental relationships. I will also analyze how emotional health and mental illness have become a generational issue for Millennials.

## IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONS

The vast majority of the respondents believed that emotions are important; whether or not this is unique to the generation of Millennials, it is a characteristic of growing up in a therapeutic society. Aditi believed that emotional reactions should be considered valid: “what people feel is very real. You can’t discount people’s reactions to things,” while Antonio added that he tends to “go with my gut” in many scenarios: “when I choose something big, I mostly do what would make me happy.” Jacqueline echoed, “it’s very important to know yourself fully and how you feel. To really base a lot of your decisions on your emotions and how it’s going to make you feel.” Choosing what would bring happiness was a common theme, although many respondents often added that their decisions are not solely based on emotion.

Michael summarized the idea of finding a balance between emotions and logic: “I think emotions are important...but I don’t think they should be someone’s guiding compass all of the time, because more often than not it’s not the best thing in the world.” Megan described how she felt the need to “back up” and “validate” her “gut feelings,” while Isabel emphasized that she is a “logical kind of person,” and although she paid attention to emotions, she “put more stock in logic.” Priya also described, “I pay attention to my emotions but I don’t necessarily let them dictate how I’m going to act.” Millennials, although they value their emotions, gut reactions, and feelings, are not fully driven by their emotional responses but rather use them in conjunction with rationality and logic. This statement, of course, does not necessarily apply to all Millennials in the same way. Individual and situational differences do play a role in the extent to which certain young people utilize (or fail to utilize) rationality as a counterweight to emotion.

Those who mentioned suffering from mental illnesses such as depression spoke to the importance of being able to regulate and control emotions. Ashley mentioned having to be “on my guard about my emotions and more protective about my feelings” so that her depression does not

become debilitating. Megan also described the importance of managing her emotions so that she could “function.” Many of these attitudes towards emotions reflect a psychological mindset.

Emotions are things to be valued, managed, and tempered with logic, but most importantly they are not something to be ignored.

#### “TALK THERAPY”

Respondents emphasized that, because Millennials value emotions, they are also more willing to talk about their feelings than are members of older generations. Jenny saw Millennials as “open” while Thomas emphasized that “Millennials are more willing to talk about their feelings.” Samantha, who had described herself earlier as an archetypical Millennial, mentioned that “emotions are my favorite thing in the world. I love talking about emotions.” However, not all respondents were fully open to discussing their feelings. Although Thomas saw Millennials as willing to discuss emotions, he still felt that this behavior constituted “admitting weakness.” Citing personal preference, Isabel also mentioned “a tendency to keep things bottled up.” Emblematic of the diversity of the Millennial generation and the difficulty of generalizations, although the Millennial generation in its entirety seems to value emotions and be more willing to talk about them, individual members do not always follow that trend.

For those that were in favor of talking about their emotions, they believed it helped them to overcome their fears and anxieties. Megan described being able to “talk myself down” while Matthew mentioned that talking about his concerns “always makes me feel better at the end.” In terms of insecurities, however, talking openly about them was less likely to bring a sense of resolution. Priya described how discussing her insecurities “too much ... was making me feel worse because it was causing me to dwell on them all the time.” As a result of dwelling on her insecurities, Priya found herself engaging in “negative thought patterns.” Oppositely, some respondents found

that discussing their insecurities helped them to not feel alone. Jenny described how talking about insecurities can make one realize “they’re common among so many other people... It’s just nice to hear that other people feel the same.” Talk therapy as a coping strategy, then, is used in different ways by different individuals, but was seen overall as an important method of managing emotions, fears, anxieties, and concerns.

### **Support Networks: To Whom Do Millennials Talk?**

Rather than broadcast their personal emotions to society at large – as social media makes possible – respondents emphasized that they limit their discussion of emotions to those in their close circles.<sup>12</sup> Lauren emphasized how these close circles remind her she is “not alone” and that she has “people around me who really care and won’t let me drown.” Nicole described discussing anxieties with her friends because “they’re going through the same process, so they can empathize and know what it’s like.” The majority of respondents, however, were more likely to share their emotions with their significant others or parents than with friends. Lauren attributed this to a “desire to only let them [friends] into the good things.” Priya added that although she talks openly with her boyfriend, she is less open with her friends because they cannot relate to her specific situation. This idea that friends are not in a similar situation was echoed by Casey, who described “openly and easily” discussing emotions with her husband but felt that she and her friends were “in different life phases, so it doesn’t make sense to talk with them about [anxieties like buying a house] because they’re not there yet.” Antonio also mentioned discussing emotions with his girlfriend because he has a “bigger connection with her,” compared to his friends.

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<sup>12</sup> Discussion of emotion, in this case, is separate from discussion of topics that hold emotional value. For example, many respondents described posting on social media about social justice campaigns they found important, which could be seen as a sharing of emotions. Here, and in the rest of the chapter, discussing emotions refers to the sharing of personal feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or fear.

Many respondents also described being most comfortable talking to their parents. Lauren mentioned having a “very open relationship” with her parents, while Nicole added that when she feels “completely overwhelmed ... that’s normally the time when I call my mom.” This emotional connection between Millennials and their parents is perhaps unique to this generation. Millennials were raised in a therapeutic culture by parents who wanted their children to be “happy,” and so describe strong emotional bonds with their parents. Millennials’ relationships with their parents will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

## NON-VERBAL COPING STRATEGIES

Although most respondents thought that verbally expressing emotions was an important coping strategy, many also utilized non-verbal strategies that still center around emotions. The most common strategy involved some form of “trying not to think about it.” In other words, respondents tried to ignore or downplay their emotions and anxieties. Nicole described “pretend[ing] it doesn’t exist” while Ashley mentioned: “if I am worried or anxious, I just try and pretend it’s not happening ... it weighs on the back of my mind and I try to push it aside.” Although Millennials are an emotional generation, emotional intelligence and coping abilities vary individually.

Another strategy involved shifts in perspective, such as focusing on the present in order to minimize concerns about the future. Josh described “trying not to think too much in advance ... because thinking too far ahead ... tends to bog me down.” Similarly, Megan mentioned trying to “chug along” and accept her anxieties while trusting that everything will “be fine.” Catherine explained how she tries “to be conscious of whether something I’m stressing or worrying about is positive or productive in any way.” She emphasized that, due to Millennials’ stage in the life cycle, “everything seems like a really big deal right now because we’re in this narcissistic moment in our

lives.” However, she countered that “we don’t have to have everything figured out and that’s okay.”

Jacqueline summarized her own perspective-based strategy:

Someone said to me one time, be where your feet are. Don't stress about the future. Think and plan your future, but don't stress about it. So definitely one strategy I have is being in the present. If I'm at work thinking about something I have to do later, I'll be like, no I'll worry about that later, right now I'm here and [I need to] focus on what I'm doing now. That's one strategy I have that really works and it keeps me more grounded, more in touch with the moment and I think that's very helpful.

This method of coping with negative emotions involves the reassertion of ontological trust (Giddens 1991) in an attempt to overcome anxiety. By acknowledging their anxiety and changing their perspective, many Millennials are able to lessen their existential insecurity and find social explanations for their individual emotional concerns. These social explanations seem to be developed in tandem with other young people as well as with older adults. Most respondents described a willingness to ask their parents for advice, and as older generations may have more experience with the process of becoming an adult, their advice may emphasize finding perspective. As many of the anxieties and insecurities of Millennials are based on the dual factors of modernity and coming of age, focusing on the present situation can lessen ontological concerns by grounding Millennials in reality.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

For many respondents, their relationship with their parents is one based on emotional support. They described how their parents’ expectations for their children centered around subjective versions of emotional happiness. Megan described, “my parents were always like ‘you can do whatever you want, we love you no matter what.’” Similarly, Lauren stated, “my parents just wanted us to be happy and doing something that we loved,” while Jacqueline added, “my mom is just like, ‘you have to do the best you can.’ My dad says, ‘do what makes you happy, life’s too short.’” These relationships between Millennials and their parents are indicative of the influences of

therapeutic culture. Rather than holding rigid expectations regarding particular pathways into adulthood, Millennials' parents seem to prioritize "happiness" and the pursuit of personal interests. It is plausible that parents' emphasis on emotional happiness may lead Millennials to be unprepared for the inevitable unhappiness of life in the social world. Further work must be done to understand the effect of these parenting strategies.

### **Protective Cocoons**

As a component of these emotional parent-child relationships, many young people described growing up feeling "sheltered" and protected by their parents. Thomas saw this as a positive component of his childhood. Antonio explained how his parents "were very involved in my life to where I felt if anything happened they would always be there for me." Josh and Lauren were more hesitant to see their parents' protection as a purely positive force in their childhood. Lauren thought that because her parents "really sheltered us from the hard work" she felt she was less aware of the difficulties of the pathway towards success. Josh added, "I feel like I was overprotected, that they did too much for me and didn't let me do enough on my own." He went on to say that he "didn't fight it off" and was more than willing to accept their help. These two examples may reinforce the earlier hypothesis that Millennials, having been protected throughout their childhood and adolescence, are unprepared to face the realities of adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

Parental protection, in some ways, is dependent on social factors such as class and immigrant status. Megan described how growing up "in an environment where your parents have time to pay attention to you because their work affords them that luxury of having free time" allowed her to feel more protected and sheltered than her peers whose parents were less financially secure. In a more dramatic example, Lisa explained how her upper class parents would be able to utilize their

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<sup>13</sup> It is also possible that detrimental overprotection depends on the individual family. Lauren and Josh are siblings.

resources to protect her: “if I murdered someone, my parents would be hiring the best lawyers they possibly could to minimize my sentence even though I had done that. So that’s the kind of protection that I think wealth and status really does offer you, and I’ll be honest, I’m very thankful for that.” Priya, a daughter of immigrants, saw her parents as overprotective: “because they are immigrants and they didn’t know how a lot of American culture is.” While respondents overall described a feeling of protection, this protection inevitably varies by family structure.

Respondents who were children of immigrants also described relationships in which their parents had expectations beyond emotional happiness. Aditi mentioned that her parents “expected a lot from me ... [and] gave me a lot of resources ... to make sure that I had opportunities to succeed because that was the whole point of them coming to America.” This attitude was echoed by Antonio: “there was a lot of pressure, especially coming from my dad, where I had to be this person and I had to do this job because they sacrificed so much. I felt if I didn’t have my life set by the age of 22 I was going to be failing them.” Victoria also cited her parents’ “American Dream” as a factor influencing her relationship with them. She described how she limits her complaints because she doesn’t want “to cause that kind of stress on them... after everything they’ve been through.” Different from children of native-born parents, children of immigrants seem to be held to higher, more specific expectations based upon the notion of the “American Dream.”

Although experienced differently by individuals, parental protection forms a type of “protective cocoon,” a concept in modernity Giddens describes as “the defensive protection which filters out potential dangers impinging from the external world and which is founded psychologically upon basic trust” (Giddens 1991:244). In Giddens’ theory, protective cocoons are developed psychologically and individually. For Millennials, however, it is possible that parental overprotection and sheltering has externalized these protective cocoons, perhaps leaving young people overly reliant on their emotional connections with their parents. Being unable to establish their own protective

cocoons may leave Millennials more vulnerable to existential and ontological anxieties and fears, and a facet of developing coping strategies during emerging adulthood may include the development of an intrinsically-based protective cocoon.<sup>14</sup>

### *Continuing to Feel Protected*

The intrinsic development of a protective cocoon may, however, be limited by the continued feeling of protection experienced by Millennials as a result of engaged parents. Lauren described how, even at the age of 24, she still experiences “a lot of hand-holding.” She sees this as a positive because, despite living alone and being employed full-time, she is “not ready to do the whole adulting thing totally.” In Lauren’s case, the extrinsic factor of her parents’ hand-holding exacerbates intrinsic, subjective factors that prevent her from completing the transition into independent adulthood and fully “adulting.” Jenny, a 25-year-old, described how in her relationship with her parents she wanted the “*normal adult amount* of catch me if I fall but don’t be ahead of me looking out” (emphasis added). In Jenny’s perspective, the normal parental attitude is to provide a safety net, indicating that Millennials may expect their parents’ protective cocoon to continue even as they move beyond the stage of emerging adulthood. Megan also saw her parents as “always going to be pretty involved” while Nicole stated, “I can’t see my parents ever stepping out of my life and just not offering any more protection.”

Catherine foresaw the perpetuation of a “less tangible security feeling” even as financial support declined. This idea that emotional support will outlast monetary support was echoed by several other respondents, including Priya who described seeing herself “asking them [her parents]

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<sup>14</sup> Further study should also explore the possibility that Millennials develop other forms of extrinsic protective cocoons as they move from the family household into other social spaces. For example, much media attention has been given to the concept of college campuses as “safe spaces” (see Haidt and Lukianoff 2015, Shulevitz 2015). I would argue that the desire for “safe spaces” is an attempt to shape universities into a new form of protective cocoon.

for help and advice about stuff in the future but hopefully being able to do it myself.” In many ways, Millennials’ expectations for their own future included a continued emotional reliance on their parents. While they emphasized that they wanted to be independent – particularly financially – they also expected to be able to rely on their parents as need be. This complicates emerging adults’ narratives of self-sufficiency. On the one hand, Millennials place great value on becoming independent and self-sufficient. On the other, many Millennials value their emotional connection with their parents and expect to be emotionally supported even into their early and mid 20s.

### **Parental Safety Nets**

The most tangible aspect of parental protection was emergency financial support. Many respondents believed that their parents would serve as a financial safety net if they ever were in need of assistance. While the idea of parents supporting their children in case of need is not completely different from previous generations, parents of Millennials’ seem to link the concepts of emotional and financial safety nets.<sup>15</sup> Although perhaps previous generations only returned to the family if they were in desperate financial need, Millennials believe their parents will continue to provide emotional support even without financial support and that the offer of financial support is, at heart, an emotional offer. Lauren stated: “I have always known that they were going to support me. They’ve always said that no matter what happens in life they’re never going to let me drown, whether it be emotionally, my living situation, financially, whatever.” She went on to say that “they’ll let me struggle a bit” but emphasized again that “they’ll never let me drown.” Similarly, Amanda felt that her parents would “always support” her and that she would always “have a roof over my head.” Michael described how his parents would provide “a protection or insurance against being homeless [or] hungry” by helping him with rent money. This sentiment was so widespread among respondents

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the phenomenon of parental support of adult children, see Katherine S. Newman’s *The Accordion Family* (2012).

that at least half of the people interviewed specifically mentioned that their parents would provide them financial support if necessary, with the exact phrase “roof over my head” being repeated at least twice.<sup>16</sup> Respondents seemed to utilize these offers of parental financial support as an emotional buffer. Rather than expressing any desire to return to the family home, Millennials use the knowledge that their parents will support them in a “worst case scenario” as a coping mechanism to alleviate some of their fears of failure.

For Millennials, remaining under their parents’ financial protection may allow them to take bigger risks in their career choices. Megan explained how although her first job out of college had a “very humble stipend,” her parents were able to support her financially. Nicole described “knowing I could go back home” as “a buffer from completely failing.” This provided her some solace towards her anxieties for the future; she stated, “it’s not the end of the world if I wasn’t able to get into graduate school.” Victoria, also, was aware that her parents would help her if she “ever spent my salary stupidly” and could not make a car payment. However, many of these statements were tempered by the idea that parental involvement was a back-up plan. Josh described how his parents “want the primary plan to have us be self-sustaining” but were “more than willing to be the secondary source.” This underscores the value emerging adults place on self-sufficiency as well as the emotional nature of parental assurances of support.

For many young adults, the knowledge that their parents will provide for them if necessary is complicated. Importantly, it does not limit their desire to be self-sufficient or to accomplish their own goals for adulthood. Because of this, Millennials are still affected by the anxieties of coming of age. However, their close, protective, and emotional relationships with their parents highlight the

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<sup>16</sup> Further research on whether this offer of financial support is class-bound is necessary to clarify the dimensions of these safety nets. It is also possible that the parents of Millennials – late Baby Boomers and early Generation X-ers – are able to offer financial protection to their adult children due to their status as one of the most economically successful generations.

exploratory component of this life stage. Protected from total failure by involved parents, some Millennials are able to take lower salary jobs, move back home when necessary, and pursue only the paths that they see as fulfilling, engaging, or “happy.” As with other generalizations about this generation, this is not the case for all Millennials, particularly those with less supportive parents or parents that have fewer resources. Older, more established Millennials may also have different relationships with their parents. Casey, who is 25 and married, received very little assistance from her family. This is also not a blanket statement: David, who is 27, mentioned that his parents own the house he lives in. Although affected by individual family dynamics, Millennials’ relationships with their parents often center around the idea of protection, both emotional and financial.

## MENTAL ILLNESS

Although I have touched upon diagnosed, medical mental illnesses, this thesis primarily discusses anxiety, insecurity, and fear as social phenomena. However, the idea of mental illness is important when discussing the Millennial generation, particularly because of the extensive literature regarding the “mental health crisis” on college campuses (see Kruisselbrink Flatt 2013, Twenge 2011, and Belluz 2011).<sup>17</sup> In this section I will discuss Millennials’ views of mental illness, particularly anxiety and depression, in a more medicalized framework. Overall, respondents expressed three primary opinions regarding mental illness: (1) mental illnesses are actual medical conditions, (2)

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<sup>17</sup> Whether or not young adults are actually experiencing a mental health crisis is up for debate. Eagan et al. (2016) found that, over the past 50 years, college students’ self-ratings of emotional health have decreased. It is possible that rates of mental illness are increasing and rates of self-reported emotional health are decreasing because young adults are more likely to report their emotional health problems and to seek help for them. This is related to the apparent destigmatization of mental illness among younger generations. However, it is also possible that due to the social factors outlined in this thesis, young adults are more prone to developing diagnosable mental health issues such as anxiety or depression. Further work must tackle the causality of the mental health crisis.

mental illness is an important issue within the Millennial generation, and (3) there is further need for social acceptance and de-stigmatization of mental illness.

Just as Millennials validate emotions as important, they were primarily of the mindset that mental illnesses are legitimate medical conditions that need to be taken seriously. Michael described how in contrast to many older people who were of the mindset that those suffering from mental illnesses “need to buck up and deal with [their] problems,” he viewed “mental illness as an illness.” Victoria emphasized that society has “made great strides” by viewing mental illness “as an illness and not a choice,” and went on to say that she is “proud” of younger generations for moving towards acceptance. She added that young people “are accepting [of mental illness], but we also legitimize that it’s real, we validate it, and we’re not afraid of it or of labelling it ... We’re embracing it, I think we’re just more aware of it.” Because of this, she believed that young people are more willing to seek and receive treatment for their own anxiety and depression. Several respondents echoed this perspective, and Megan, Priya, and Lauren each mentioned seeing a therapist for their own mental health.

### **Mental Health as a Generational Issue**

Perhaps due to question structure (see Appendix A), many respondents framed their opinions regarding mental illness in terms of generational sentiment. The modal response underscored that Millennials are “growing more and more accepting” (Jacob, 19). Although Michael countered that “there are definitely young people that still hold more traditional beliefs about mental illness ... I would say, on average, it’s probably more young people that view it as an illness versus older people.” As a component of this generation’s progressivism, Millennials “take mental illness seriously” (Antonio, 22). In Aaron’s words: “I think younger people in general are more accepting. I think just... the world's changed, I think they're more accepting about a lot of things, I mean, race, sexuality, you know, marijuana, whatever...and more accepting of people in general. I think that

would include mental illness.” Jacqueline added that Millennials “are much more accepting of taking care of your emotional health and how you feel,” while Catherine stated, “there’s less stigma around having a mental illness or talking about mental illness issues for young people and I think that’s a good thing ... [it is] helpful to have people speaking openly about their feelings and experiences.”

Many respondents framed Millennials’ acceptance in contrast to the lack of acceptance in older generations. Isabel explained how younger people are “very open with it [mental illness] now. People talk about having anxiety, depression. I feel like ... with older generations that was probably not discussed.” Similarly, Priya thought that older generations may not have had the tools or resources to manage, acknowledge, or talk about mental illnesses, whereas Millennials are “more accepting and more willing to get help.” Lisa, who had battled depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder, had a strong opinion regarding generational differences in opinion regarding mental health:

I feel like people who are older absolutely are not accepting of mental illness. They think it's for crazy people and if you go to a psych ward because you need help for 24 hours then you're fucking nuts. And I feel like, that's because it's so common and so many people in high school and college are suffering from depression and anxiety that people don't, I feel like younger people don't care. If anything they are really angry that people are so upset about everything all the time and people live in this perpetual state of anxiety and depression.

In Lisa’s interview, she talked extensively about the number of her peers who were suffering from various mental illnesses. Her perspective seems to align with reports of the “mental health crisis” in the Millennial generation (Kruisselbrink Flatt 2013).

Whether or not more young people are suffering from mental illness than in previous generations was a question left unanswered in this study. Michael noted that “it certainly seems” like more young people are suffering from anxiety and depression, but countered, “it could just be that it’s being diagnosed more often, people are more open about it so it seems more prevalent. Whereas it could have always been there before but no one talked about it.” While further study is required to

answer that particular question, it remains clear that – at least among those interviewed for the study – Millennials hold strong opinions regarding mental illness.

### **Need for Acceptance**

Although Millennials see themselves as accepting of mental illness, they also believe that “there is still a long way to go” until complete acceptance (Nicole, 21). Ashley commented,

I think that there has been a larger push for mental health awareness and understanding mental health... I think at the same time, there is a huge sense of judgment that comes with people who have mental health [issues]. I still see people judging other people for going through mental health issues ... I think, policy-wise, people are willing to help people who are going through mental illness. But at the same time when they come face to face with it, there is a huge amount of discrimination and judgment that comes from other people.

This idea of judgment was echoed by Emi, who stated that “society views people who have mental health issues very negatively... people are very judgmental, very quick to judge.” Megan added, “people are really dismissive of mental illness and mental health issues... I think on the surface it seems like we’re at a really progressive place ... [but] I think it’s a superficial acceptance and understanding of mental illness.” She went on to say that although “people think they understand it ... people can’t help their inherent biases.” Again underscoring the infeasibility of generalization, even some of the interview respondents were dismissive of mental illness, such as Kayla who believed some people used mental health problems as a means of removing blame from themselves.

Casey and Lauren both believed that, because of the lack of complete acceptance, mental health needs to be addressed in broader society. Lauren described how, because anxiety and depression are surrounded by stigma, she often feels “isolated and alone” because of her mental illnesses. She went on to say,

I really think that mental health is something that needs to be addressed more. I think that... there is still so much fear and stigma around mental health, no matter how many stats we throw at people and say 80% of the population deals with this, or 1 in 5 people or whatever. It still isn’t making it any easier to stand up and ask for help. And I don’t know how to solve that or make it easier or make help more accessible or how to encourage more people to seek help, but it’s something that I think that we need to pay more attention to, definitely.

Her belief in the need for activism was shared by Casey, who emphasized that “we need to relieve that stigma” and “provide space to open up about those kinds of issues more.” The language used to describe mental illness – stigma, acceptance, bias – is reflective of the influence of psychology in modernity. It is possible that Millennials’ comfort with therapeutic narratives and emotions has contributed to their acceptance and validation of mental illness.

## CONCLUSION

Modernity’s focus on individual subjectivity has been accompanied by an increased emphasis on emotion, constructing what Illouz (2007) terms a “therapeutic society.” This therapeutic society, based primarily on the rise of psychological ways of thinking, has permeated the mindsets of those living in modernity. It is impossible to discuss the anxieties, fears, and emotions of young people without acknowledging that this language has been transformed by modern emotionalism. Millennials were raised in a therapeutic culture, and as a result value emotions and close relationships and maintain an awareness of mental and emotional health. To manage their anxieties and fears for the future, Millennials employ psycho-social coping mechanisms. In other words, they are able to assuage their individual anxieties and fears by discussing their emotions or relying on parental support. As previously described, this generation is one that values social engagement. For this reason, a sociological (rather than psychological) lens offers important insights into how Millennials use extrinsic methods – such as open discussion and reliance on family relationships – of managing intrinsic anxiety and insecurity. Paralleling the acceptance and openness of this generation, Millennials’ subjective and emotional individualism is countered by a willingness to share their feelings and rely on close personal networks.

## CONCLUSION

As the first generation to come of age in high modernity, Millennials' pathways into adulthood have been profoundly affected by the processes of social change that have accompanied modernization. While existence in the modern world is tenuous and anxiety-inducing for all individuals, Millennials must learn how to "adult" within the de-traditionalized framework of modernity, and the combined uncertainties of modern life and the coming of age process serve to exacerbate their existential anxieties and insecurities. The empirical data collected through my interviews with young people lend weight to the theoretical framework presented at the beginning of this thesis and demonstrate the extent to which Millennials are a modern generation, both in their generational identity and in their anxieties.

Just as modernity is a complex social phenomenon, the Millennial generation exists at the intersection of complexities. Millennials define themselves as being impossible to define and understand themselves reflexively. They engage with the social world, value uniqueness and individualism, and hope to make a change. Most notably, Millennials' fears of the future, anxieties about the unknown, concerns about what it means to be an adult, and insecurities as they establish their self-identities simultaneously reflect their stage in the life course and the existential anxieties of the modern world. When considering the Millennial generation from a sociological standpoint, their existence in modernity and their stage within the life course must be considered as compounding and interconnected social influences.

## IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis has several implications. First, the experiences of modern young people demonstrate the relevance of combining modernity and generational theory, branches of sociology that have, until now, remained separate. Generational sociology, as well, has received limited

attention in the past 30 years and has not been applied to the study of Millennials. However, as identity becomes increasingly fluid and self-defined in modernity, age will remain a static identity factor and may provide sociologists with a useful means of social classification. By reviving generational sociology and paying special attention to the overlap of processes of social change and life course processes, this thesis introduces an innovative framework for the study of modern youth. This theoretical framework must be further developed and applied to future studies of Millennials and subsequent generations.

Second, this thesis indicates a need for further research on the Millennial generation to serve as a scientific counterweight to the rather superficial representations of this generation in popular culture. The nature of generational identity inevitably leads to resentment and conflict between the old and the young. As a result, non-scientific analyses of generational phenomena lack grounding in objectivity, and further empirical study may provide clearer understandings that are not tainted with generational resentment. Finally, this research raises several questions for future generations. As the juggernaut of modernity continues to efface traditional structures, subsequent generations of youth will continue to experience the conflation of modern anxieties and insecurities and the coming of age process. If Millennials are described as experiencing a “mental health crisis,” how will younger generations fare? Particularly if anxieties worsen in the context of diagnosable mental illness, social awareness of mental health may become increasingly important in the future.

To answer these questions and others, I have included here several suggestions for future research. Primarily, the nature and causes of the mental health crisis must be studied empirically in more depth and at a population level. To control for a potential lack of generalizability, this study should also be completed at a national level, perhaps through survey research. While I strongly believe that many of the findings presented here are generalizable, controlling for socioeconomic status, race, gender, immigrant status, and educational level may lead to other significant findings.

More specifically, several topics in this study merit their own empirical analyses. The creation and nature of protective cocoons in various social spaces – including the family, spaces of higher education, and social networks – should be explored. Additionally, the concept of the “curated self” should be studied in more depth to account for gender and class differences and to understand how social media affects the social life of young people. Finally, further studies must continue to explore anxiety and insecurity in the Millennial generation from a sociological standpoint.

To conclude this thesis, I wish to comment on my own takeaways from conducting this research. As a Millennial myself, this thesis was inspired by personal experience, and the process remained personal from start to finish. Engaging in empirical research regarding my peers served as a form of reflexivity that allowed me to place myself within the Millennial generation and to understand myself as a Millennial. My identity as a young person was reinforced by the discovery that many of my experiences are shared experiences. I am not alone in my anxieties for the future, my insecurities, and my frustrations with overcritical representations of youth. Conducting this research was, for me, a coping mechanism. While this thesis focused on how the specific temporal-historical context of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century plays a significant role in shaping the anxieties and insecurities of the Millennial generation, my personal outlook is not a bleak prediction of a worsening mental health crisis but rather a reflexive understanding of the challenges Millennials (myself included) must face as we learn how to adult.

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## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Statement about confidentiality. Ask for consent to record and participate.
2. Ask for general introduction
  - a. Age, School (HS & college), race, SES
3. What does it mean, in your opinion, to be a Millennial?
4. Do you see Millennials in a positive or negative light?
5. Do you consider yourself a Millennial?
6. How do Millennials/members of your generation compare to members of older generations?  
Worse? Better?
7. Do you see young people today as unique? Do you consider yourself to be unique?
8. Do you ever feel alienated/isolated from society?
9. What does your peer network look like?
10. What is the role of emotions in your day to day life? Do they play an important role (e.g. in decision making)?
11. When you were a child, what were your expectations for your adult life? Were they positive or negative? Where did those expectations come from?
12. When you were in high school, what were your expectations for your adult life? How did they change from when you were a child?
13. What are your expectations now (your vision of the future) and what are the emotions surrounding these expectations (positive/negative)?
  - a. How have these expectations changed over time? What factors led to that change?
14. Have you felt as if “reality” has affected/changed your expectations?
15. What expectations did your parents hold/do your parents continue to hold about your future?

16. Did you grow up feeling protected by your parents? Overprotected? Controlled?
  - a. What does it mean to feel safe?
  - b. Do you still feel protected by your parents? If so, do you think this protection will end? When?
17. On a day to day basis, what things make you afraid or anxious or stress you out?
  - a. What is the most stressful aspect of your life?
18. When you think about the future, what are you afraid of in the short-term (e.g. next 2-3 years)? What are you afraid of in the long term (e.g. 5, 10 years)?
19. When did you start to think about these fears? Why?
20. Do you discuss your fears regarding the future with your friends?
  - a. Do these discussions help you feel less afraid or do they make you more afraid?
21. How else do you manage these fears? What strategies do you use? (e.g. facing them, ignoring them, hiding from them, etc.)
22. What happens if you are unable to manage your fears?
23. Do you use social media? To what extent?
24. Do you compare yourself to others that you see on social media?
  - a. Do you compare yourself to others in other situations? Which is more prominent?
  - b. What kinds of things do you compare?
25. Do you feel as if there is a sense of competition among you and your peers?
26. Do you feel insecure about yourself in comparison to others?
  - a. About what are you insecure? Have you always been insecure about the same things or does it change over time?
  - b. Have you ever changed your behavior as a result of feeling insecure? (e.g. in order to fit in)

27. Do you discuss your insecurities with your friends?
  - a. Do these discussions help you feel less insecure or do they make it worse?
28. How else do you manage your insecurities? (e.g. ignoring, confronting)
  - a. What happens if you are unable to manage your insecurities?
29. Do you think that your worries/fears/insecurities are unique?
30. In your opinion, how do your worries, fears, and insecurities differ from those of older individuals/your parents when they were young?
31. How do you view mental illness? Do you think young people are more accepting of mental illness? Do you think young people are more prone to mental illness?
32. Do you have any other thoughts on what it's like to be young in the present day and age?
33. Thank you for participating! Can I contact you for further questions? Best way to reach you?
34. Is there anyone you know aged 18-24 who would be interested in participating in this study and will be in the Bay Area this summer?