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# EMERGING ADULTS, CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Sustaining Movements in the 21st Century

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Successful social movements in the United States have relied on the engagement and leadership of young adults throughout history (Young, 2008), and Strauss and Howe's (1991) generational cycle theory (GCT) posits that millennials are a dominant generation and should be in the middle of leading a social movement. Unfortunately, they do not seem to have taken on the responsibility of addressing current social problems (Boroujerdi & Wolf, 2015; Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Rather, research paints millennials as somewhat rudderless, impatient, discouraged by the economic decline that started in 2007, and unable to overcome the barriers put in front of them (After Skool, 2017; Costanza-Chock, 2013). The oldest members of the generation that follows millennials, iGen, are just now entering college and exhibit many similarities to millennials, along with some crucial differences. As iGen discovers how they can make an impact on social issues, it is yet to be seen whether they will be motivated to address those issues.

Millennials and iGen are the future leaders of our nation, and investment in their success is critical to their development. It is important for organizations and individuals working for social change in the United States to understand the attitudes, influences, and barriers that have shaped these generations, including the role older generations have played in contributing to issues like climate change and social and income inequality, so they can formulate strategies to cultivate and support the next social movement leaders.

This paper investigates the impact of young adults on social movements, why millennials have been slow to act, whether it is important that they engage, and whether the generation following millennials will see the value of participating in social movements. First, the paper uses emerging adult (EA) theory (Arnett, 2000a) to explore young people's importance to movements (Han, 2014; McAdam, 1986) and GCT as a lens to describe the participation (or not) of a generation in a social movement (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Next, the paper discusses the participation of contemporary EAs—millennials and iGen. Finally, the paper suggests how nonprofit organizations may be able to engage contemporary EAs in social movements.

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## JOIN THE DISCUSSION

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- **To what extent have millennials been involved in the Black Lives Matter action?**
- **Will iGen have the courage and stamina to help bring sensible gun laws to fruition?**
- **Have public and private institutions silenced organizers and social movements? If so, how?**
- **How might older adults take the necessary steps to develop self-reliant, independent youth prepared to take on social challenges as emerging adults?**

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# EMERGING ADULT THEORY

Evidence suggests that emerging adults (EAs) have had a significant impact on social movements in the past, but interest and commitment to movements may be waning in the United States (Delli Carpini, 2000). Before investigating EA trends with regard to social movements, civic duty, and political engagement, it is important to flush out what an emerging adult is. Emerging adulthood (EAhood) is a developmental stage between adolescence and adulthood from 18 to 29 years old (Arnett, 2000a; Arnett, 2007; Gibson, 2016; Hall & Walls, 2016). EA theory proposes five features, outlined in **table 1**, that make EAhood distinct from other developmental stages.

Activists often share similar characteristics with EAs, such as low levels of responsibility and high levels of experimentation. EAs participating in social movements are much more likely than older participants to engage in protests and risky activities, making their contributions to social movements important to investigate (Green et al., 2016; McAdam, 1986). The distinctive qualities of EAhood throughout history seem to have influenced generational cycle theory (GCT) by helping to determine if a generation is dominant or recessive (Arnett, 2013; Becker, 2015; McAdams, 2013; TEDx Talks, 2015).

**TABLE 1. EMERGING ADULTHOOD DEFINED**

Identity	Significant exploration and changes in matters of work and love
Instability	Frequent changes in living arrangements, such as roommates, cohabitation with a partner, and moving back home
Self-focus	Extensive free and leisure time, with little oversight, in which to pursue interests, explore, and have fun
In-betweenness	Some adult responsibilities, but continued reliance on others for financial or decision-making help
Optimism	A positive outlook and belief in the ability to achieve goals for the future

Source: **Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From the Late Teens Through the Twenties** (2nd ed.), by J. J. Arnett, 2015, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

# GENERATIONAL CYCLE THEORY

A generation is an age group that has been influenced by a shared set of values, politics, attitudes, and opinions present in society (Delli Carpini, 1989). Members of a generation also identify themselves as belonging to that generation and share an age location in history (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Strauss and Howe’s (1991) GCT is based on the study of four centuries of American history. They found repeating patterns based on when social moments—events that radically change a generation’s social environment—took place, how generations were affected by those social moments, and which generations took those moments and created movements. From the 1600s through the 20th century, generations have usually alternated between dominant and recessive. **Table 2** lists generations from the recent past and provides information related to how they fit into GCT, including when they were born, what years they were EAs, and the time period and type of social movement that occurred during their generation. The generations in bold are labeled as dominant according to Strauss and Howe.

Strauss and Howe found that dominant generations were usually confronted with a social moment as EAs or elders, while recessive generations were usually confronted with a social moment as adolescents or adults. Social moments become movements because dominant generations are compelled to action at a time when many of their members are free to devote themselves to the movement (Costanza-Chock, 2013). Dominant generations also have come of age during times of turmoil and change in the United States. Recessive generations, on the other hand, have come of age during times of peace and prosperity, and experienced social moments as children or in midlife. As a result, recessive generations have typically been too young to appreciate the importance of the moment or too engrossed in family, career, and child-rearing to devote significant time to that social moment. The only exception Strauss and Howe identified was during the American Civil War, when a recessive and a dominant generation combined to become one dominant generation over a longer time span.

**TABLE 2. GENERATIONS, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND EA TIME FRAMES**

	<b>BORN</b>	<b>EAHOOD</b>	<b>U.S. SOCIAL MOVEMENT</b>
<b>Greatest generation</b>	<b>1900–1927</b>	<b>1918–1952</b>	<b>Labor: 1920–1935</b>
Silent generation	1928–1945	1946–1970	(Peace and prosperity thrived)
<b>Baby boomers</b>	<b>1946–1964</b>	<b>1964–1989</b>	<b>Civil rights: 1960–1969</b>
Generation X	1965–1980	1983–2005	Gay rights: 1970–2003
<b>Millennials</b>	<b>1981–1995</b>	<b>1999–2020</b>	<b>(Still experimenting)</b>
iGen	1996–	2014–	(Still experimenting)

Sources: **iGen Tech Disruption** by Center for Generational Kinetics & Dorsey, J., 2016, retrieved from <http://genhq.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/iGen-Gen-Z-Tech-Disruption-Research-White-Paper-c-2016-Center-for-Generational-Kinetics.pdf>; **The Whys and Hows of Generations Research** by Pew Research Center, 2015, September 3, retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research>

# EA PARTICIPATION IN PAST SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The previous section discussed why, based on Strauss and Howe's theory, some generations are called to action and others may not be. This section examines what role EAs from two generations classified as dominant by Strauss and Howe—the greatest generation and baby boomers—played in the labor movement and civil rights movement, respectively. Examining what EAs have done in the past helps form a basis for what contemporary EAs may do now and in the future.

The social moment for the greatest generation was workers agitating for increased worker safety, the eight-hour workday, and the six-day work week. Hundreds of thousands of 18- to 29-year-olds spoke out against work conditions, resulting in the labor rights movement, which had significant positive outcomes for the United States, including the creation of the National Labor Board and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal (Ferguson, 1984; Peterson, 1937; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Almost 1 percent of the U.S. population participated in the labor movement, worrying lawmakers and business that a full-scale revolution may take place if changes were not made. Among that 1 percent, more than 500,000 EA-age workers went on strike and led violent clashes in 1937 and 1938, changing a social moment into a social movement (Edwards, 1930; Kimeldorf & Stepan-Norris, 1992; Lebergott, Pearlman, Cooper, & Wool, 1948; Levi, Melo, Weingast, & Zlotnick, 2015).

Baby boomers, another dominant generation, faced social moments in EAhood that included Freedom Summer, Rosa Parks's bus protest, the March on Washington, the Vietnam War, and the introduction of

the birth control pill. These moments transformed the baby boom generation into mobilizers and organizers, resulting in both the civil rights and antiwar movements (Han, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015a; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Young, 2008). Under the Freedom Riders program, civil rights organizations recruited and trained high school graduates and college students to travel throughout the South, which was still largely segregated, registering black/African American adults to vote. The vast majority of Freedom Riders fit Arnett's classic definition of an EA: only 11 percent were married, only 22 percent were employed full-time, and 80 percent were between 18 and 25 years old (McAdam, 1986). During the registration process, many of the candidates confided that they had relied on input from teachers and parents before committing to the program, another common EA trait.

The greatest generation and baby boomers addressed social crises with grassroots activism, participated in dangerous protests, and garnered media attention that focused on discrimination by law enforcement and society elites (Green et al., 2016). Han (2014) suggests that social movements require sustained pressure on the larger society to create change, and both of these dominant generations, led by EAs, provided that pressure. According to generational cycle theory millennials should be the next dominant generation, but that assessment is in doubt. And that assessment also has implications for iGen. The characteristics displayed by millennials and iGen give some insight into why these two generations seem poised to break the predictive cycle of GCT.

# CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY EAs

In 2018, EAs<sup>1</sup> include members of the millennial and iGen generations. The body of research regarding millennials is robust, with tens of thousands of search results from Google Scholar providing research and analysis of how they may or may not engage in social movements. iGen is less well known because demographers and sociologists are still debating when the millennial generation ended; for the purposes of this paper, iGen began in 1996. This is based on the social moment of September 11, 2001, and the hypothesis that people who can recall a world before 9/11 view things differently from those who have always lived with the idea of terrorism as part of daily life (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Vision Critical Communications Inc., 2016).

Millennials have been described as aspirational, positive, achievement-oriented, and altruistic, while at the same time less optimistic, less idealistic, more narcissistic, more cynical, and less trusting than previous generations (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008). iGen has been painted with the same brush, with a few exceptions (Williams, 2015). The following sections investigate these claims.

## MILLENNIAL ATTITUDES, INFLUENCES, AND BARRIERS

Some researchers argue that millennials have been the victim of many social science experiments conducted by their baby boomer and Gen-X parents that may not have served them well. These include the self-esteem movement (Baumeister et al., 2003), permissive parenting (Henschel, 2014; Mowen, 2011), and helicopter parenting (Berkup, 2014). Self-esteem, for example, has shown no bearing on educational success or task performance (Baumeister, 2005). In fact, children with high self-esteem are more likely to bully or display egotistical and narcissistic traits (Baumeister, 2005; Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

Millennials tend to be more inwardly focused than previous generations, except for baby boomers, and parenting may be the reason for that (Becker, 2015). In a survey, 54 percent of parents reported that they could never be too involved in their children's lives, 57 percent reported being overprotective, and 45 percent reported giving in too quickly (Pew Research Center, 2015b). Such overprotectiveness, overinvolvement, and unwarranted positive reinforcement from parents, teachers, and coaches may have made it more difficult for millennials to deal with failure and setbacks (Becker, 2015). In fact, when millennial children and young adults encounter failure or rejection, they often struggle to deal with it effectively (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Unfortunately, millennials have been confronted with failure and rejection on a large scale, especially the youngest of them.

When the oldest millennials reached EA age in 1999, the economy was strong, unemployment was under 4 percent, the dot-com bubble was at its peak, and the proportion of millennials in college was larger than any other generation. Just eight years later, as the youngest millennials reached EA age, they saw their parents, families, friends, and nation struggle with two wars, the dot-com meltdown, record housing foreclosures, the country's political polarization, the explosion of personal debt, and the second-worst recession in U.S. history (Baumeister, 2005; Baumeister et al., 2003; Cushman, 1990; Tulgan & Rainmaker Thinking Inc., 2013).

These devastating economic conditions; a broadening gap between the wealthy and poor; and the unethical behavior of some business, political, and institutional leaders appear to have led to what some see as millennials' widespread cynicism and lack of trust in institutions (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Wong et al., 2008). Millennials have also demonstrated less loyalty to employers and organizations than any preceding generation (Becker, 2015; Harding, Carpenter, Finelli, & Passow, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> In this section, the terms EA and contemporary EA refer to both the millennial and iGen generations, unless otherwise noted.

## **iGEN ATTITUDES, INFLUENCES, AND BARRIERS**

The members of iGen have grown up with many of the same influences from their Generation X parents, some of which have been more extreme. They have been immersed in social media since early childhood, helicopter parenting has intensified (Pew Research Center, 2015b), they are overscheduled, and the self-esteem movement has been replaced with a culture of safety and protection (Tulgan & Rainmaker Thinking Inc., 2013). Despite the similar influences, iGen members appear to be more pragmatic, hardworking, and anxious than millennials, having lived most of their lives in a recession followed by a weak recovery, along with a hyperpartisan political environment (Boroujerdi & Wolf, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2016; Insured Retirement Institute & Center for

Generational Kinetics, 2015; Tulgan & Rainmaker Thinking Inc., 2013; Williams, 2015).

Members of iGen are more apt to take a high-paying job over one that makes a difference or provides for work-life balance. They are often characterized as less trusting than millennials and tend to believe they will have to take care of themselves like Generation X did when they grew up. Many iGen members believe they will have access to fewer social benefits, such as social security, student debt forgiveness, and affordable health care, than previous generations (Tulgan & Rainmaker Thinking Inc., 2013). They appear to think that to be successful they will have to do it on their own, all while supporting aging baby boomer and Gen-X family members (Spillman & Pezzin, 2000).



# WILL CONTEMPORARY EAs LEAD THE NEXT SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

Contemporary EAs face challenging times. They have lived all or most of their lives with the threat of terrorism. They understand that they will be paying to ensure their parents and grandparents have guaranteed social security with almost no prospect of collecting it themselves. They are witnessing the societal consequences of climate change; a global water crisis; and the effects of economic, social, and resource inequality (World Economic Forum, 2016). Will these social moments spur them to action?

In 2020, the youngest millennials will be 29. The generation is quickly aging out of the EA time frame, and, based on their past actions, not enough of them seem willing to commit the time necessary to build social movements. They have historically acted only within the moment, reflecting a preference for short-term action over long-term movements (Berkup, 2014). These actions include Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and protests against President Trump's Executive Order no. 5, which has been described as a "Muslim ban" (Tinker, 2016). Millennials' preference for short-term action could be the result of a distrust of organizations, institutions, and political leaders (Delli Carpini, 2000; Tulgan & Rainmaker Thinking Inc., 2013; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Another contributing factor could be that moving from activist to organizer takes time, patience, and sacrifice (Han, 2014) that millennials, so often characterized as self-focused, are less willing to commit. Millennials are also 25 percent less likely to join social movement organizations, which

are traditionally where organizers are developed and trained (Delli Carpini, 2000), and organizers are critical to the success of social movements (Han, 2014). The barriers of time and trust alone are challenges for millennials to overcome. Coupled with the fact that most millennials are in the middle of child-rearing right now, it is unlikely that they will lead the next social movement (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

For iGen, it is too early to tell if they will take on the mantle of a recessive generation or be compelled to act. Similarities between them and the silent generation—the most productive in U.S. history—have started to emerge and may be early signs that they will rejuvenate the American work ethic (Williams, 2015). IGen is supposed to be recessive, as the silent generation was, and its members have also been described as pragmatic, but unlike the silent generation, iGen is not living in times of peace and prosperity. These conflicting facts make it challenging to apply GCT. It's possible that contemporary EAs could represent the second anomaly in Strauss and Howe's theory by repeating the behavior of the civil war generations and joining forces to become a single, dominant entity that begins to finally displace baby boomers and Generation X from their entrenched positions of power. This would provide the time and EA numbers necessary to take on the social issues that EAs have inherited from their baby boomer and Gen-X forebears (Scott, 2016).

# CHALLENGES TO ASSESSING THE ROLE OF EAs IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

History is best viewed from a distance. Researchers and theorists are not only still defining contemporary EAs and the generations they belong to, they are also still identifying the social moments that will come to characterize the years during which these generations were EAs. With that in mind, it may only be with the benefit of hindsight that the full impact of millennials or iGen becomes clear. The long-term effect of short-term actions like Black Lives Matter and an understanding of contemporary EAs' role in such movements may not be known for some time.

The way social movements happen and the way individuals respond to contemporary issues and problems also seems to be changing. The advent of social media, the reliability of information in the digital age (Weiler, 2005), and the rise of the sharing economy are affecting what movements look like, how protests are defined, and how individuals agitate for change. While members of the greatest generation and baby boomers found their voice in taking to the streets, EAs today may be seeking other ways to make their voices heard.

Further investigation into how previous generations overcame the challenges their parents left them and past generations' attitudes toward EAs could dispel some of the frustration toward millennials' lack of engagement (Arnett, 2013) that members of older generations may feel. A deeper dive into Strauss and Howe's generational types (adaptive, idealist, reactive, and civic) may also shed light on why millennials seem not to have taken on the mantle of a dominant generation. Some also suggest that the war against youth, specifically those of color, has suppressed their voice and agency through discriminatory policies, heightened surveillance, repression, and criminalization, making it riskier for adolescents and EAs to engage in social movements than it was for previous generations (Green et al., 2016; Wacquant, 2001).

# CALL TO ACTION: CULTIVATING THE POTENTIAL OF CONTEMPORARY EAs

With the youngest millennials nearing the end of EAhood and iGen slated to be a recessive generation, organizations and individuals working for social change in the United States have a relatively small window of opportunity to cultivate these generations as organizers and social movement leaders. Doing so requires baby boomers and Generation X to take responsibility for their own past failures, relinquish their hold on the levers of power, and invest the time necessary to develop the agents of change to come. It also requires those interested in tapping into the potential of contemporary EAs to engage with them in

dialogue designed to truly understand their attitudes and influences as well as the barriers that may be preventing their deep involvement in today's social issues. Millennials and iGen are the future leaders of our nation, and investment in their success is critical to their development. Leading by example, mentoring, teaching how to give and receive feedback, developing work as a safe place, rebuilding trust, and developing realistic expectations (Sinek, 2017) are but a few of the requirements to prepare these emergent generations for the economic, social, and civic responsibilities that will be required of them.

# CONCLUSION

Young adults have been the driving force behind social movements throughout the history of the United States (Young, 2008), and EA theory (Arnett, 2000a, 2000b) helps explain this demographic's importance in creating social change. As long as baby boomers and Generation X lead the majority of business, government, and nonprofit organizations in America, they have a responsibility to change their approach to leadership, particularly how they treat their most important asset: people (Mooney, 2017). As millennial and iGen

participation in Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, walkouts demanding common sense gun laws, and other recent movements illustrates, contemporary EAs have the passion and skills necessary to take on the social issues facing our country. If organizations can tap into those in a way that acknowledges the unique characteristics of millennials and iGen and offers an infrastructure to support their continued involvement, these generations may yet become the leaders of social movements today and into the future.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## MARK A. THOMPSON

**Executive Director, Rancho Family YMCA  
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Mark A. Thompson, Executive Director of the Rancho Family YMCA in San Diego, has been working for the YMCA of San Diego County for 25 years. He spent the majority of his tenure in overnight camping as the Executive Manager of YMCA Camp Surf and was hired as the Executive Director of the Rancho Family YMCA in 2012.

He received his Bachelor of Science degree in Human Services from Springfield College (Mass.) and Master of Arts degree in Leadership and Nonprofit Management from the University of San Diego.

He is YMCA faculty for two Y courses—Leading Successful Teams and Group & Team Work—and has been a certified emergency medical technician. Mark has been active in Rotary since 1999, served as treasurer of the Community Campership Council board of directors, was an advisory board member for Mar Vista High School’s Poseidon Academy of Marine Science & Engineering, and recently joined the Coronado Schools Foundation’s board of directors.

Mark is passionate about staff development, capital development, program innovation, and training and leadership development. Mark and his wife, Zayanne, live at YMCA Camp Surf, and their son, Keaton, just started his freshman year at the University of Redlands (Calif.). In his spare time, Mark enjoys the outdoors and carpentry and likes to ski, surf, golf, and read.

