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# EXISTENTIAL AGENCY IN AMERICA

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*“Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.”*

VIKTOR FRANKL | MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Existential psychology plays a central role in human progress and flourishing, in part, because meaning in life is a self-regulatory and motivational resource that helps people live healthy, productive, prosocial, and goal-oriented lives. More specifically, to explore, create, innovate, persevere in the face of adversity, have an optimistic attitude about the future, and come together in the service of solving the big challenges of today and building a better tomorrow, people need to view themselves as existential agents—individuals who believe they have the power to live a meaningful life. The greater people’s existential agency, the more they will be driven to improve their own lives and the lives of others. This report offers a snapshot of existential agency in America.

### Key Findings:

- The majority of Americans (63%) agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life (high existential agency). This is the case for both men and women and across regions of the country.
- Existential agency varies across generations. A minority (39%) of American adults under the age of 25 agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. For all age groups 25 and older, a majority of Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.
- Level of education is positively associated with existential agency. The majority of Americans who have at least a high school level education agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life, but only 39% of those with less than a high school level of education agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.
- Household income is positively associated with existential agency. However, the majority of Americans in every income group agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.
- Work is positively associated with existential agency. Employed and retired Americans are more likely to agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life than Americans who are not

working but are not retired. Among working Americans, self-employed workers are the most likely to agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

- Marriage is positively associated with existential agency. Nearly 70% of married Americans, just over half of never-married Americans, and less than half of currently separated Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.
- Belief in the American Dream is strongly associated with existential agency. Some 77% of Americans who believe they have achieved the American Dream and 66% of those who believe they are on their way to achieving the American Dream agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Only 32% of those who believe the American Dream is out of reach agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

## EXISTENTIAL AGENCY: THE MOTIVATIONAL POWER OF MEANING IN LIFE

Humans are a uniquely existential species.<sup>1</sup> Our advanced cognitive capacities render us capable of contemplating the nature of our existence, which orients us toward a quest for meaning in life. We don't just strive for survival. We strive for significance. We want our lives to matter. A large body of research indicates that meaning is important for both mental and physical health. People who feel meaningful are more satisfied with the conditions of their lives<sup>2</sup> and less at risk of depression,<sup>3</sup> drug and alcohol abuse,<sup>4</sup> and suicide.<sup>5</sup> In addition, when people face mental health challenges and are seeking treatment, meaning in life plays a central role in treatment success.<sup>6</sup> Life inevitably involves pain and suffering. Eventually, we all experience hardship, lose loved ones, and must face death ourselves. Meaning is a vital psychological resource for navigating these challenges in healthy and productive ways.<sup>7</sup> The belief that one's life is meaningful also predicts future physical health and longevity.<sup>8</sup>

Meaning in life contributes to individual flourishing beyond mental and physical health. For instance, working adults who view their jobs as meaningful demonstrate stronger job performance than those who don't view their jobs as meaningful.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, encouraging college students to view education as contributing to meaning in life improves grade performance.<sup>10</sup> Research also finds that meaning in life predicts gains in household income and net worth over time.<sup>11</sup>

Meaning helps people flourish in many areas of life, in part, because it is a self-regulatory and motivational resource. The more people believe that they have a meaningful role to play in the world, the more motivated they are to direct their behavior in ways that helps keep them alive and thriving. For instance, people are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors such as physical exercise when they are focused on meaning in life.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, students are more likely to persist on tedious academic activities and avoid distractions (e.g., watch viral videos or play video games) when they associate their education with meaning in life.<sup>13</sup> More broadly, studies I conducted with my research team find that when people reflect on what makes their lives meaningful, they are more motivated to pursue their goals and more confident they can achieve them.<sup>14</sup> Other researchers find a similar relationship between meaning in life and goal motivation.<sup>15</sup>

Meaning not only motivates people to regulate their own behavior in healthy and productive ways, it also inspires them to serve others. For instance, my colleagues and I have found that the more people are focused on living a meaningful life, the more motivated they are to pursue prosocial goals and the more likely they are to engage in prosocial behavior such as volunteering and charitable giving.<sup>16</sup> In short, meaning in life supports both individual and community flourishing.<sup>17</sup>

The research showing that meaning serves a self-regulatory function highlights a more agentic and action-oriented dimension of meaning. Meaning inspires people to take responsibility for their lives and thus motivates goal-directed behavior. My colleagues and I refer to this aspect of meaning as existential agency, which is defined as the belief that one has the ability to find, maintain, and restore meaning in life. In other words, existential agency is more than just believing that one's life has meaning. It more specifically represents a self-determined mindset about meaning. To be existentially agentic is to believe in one's own ability to create a meaningful life, despite the barriers, challenges, and tragedies one faces in life. In our research, we find that existential agency uniquely predicts motivation. For instance, the greater the level of existential agency among aspiring entrepreneurs, the more motivated they are to pursue their business startups.<sup>18</sup>

I propose that existential agency is an important psychological feature of a free and flourishing society. The more individuals view themselves as existential agents, the more they will take responsibility for their lives, be engaged in their communities, and have the type of positive and solution-oriented mindset that promotes human progress and societal wellbeing.

## A SNAPSHOT OF AMERICAN EXISTENTIAL AGENCY

To measure the existential agency of American adults, as part of a larger survey conducted by the Archbridge Institute, we asked just over 2,000 US adults to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: "I have the power to live a meaningful life." For this report, individuals who agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life are classified as having high existential agency, though those in the strongly agree group represent the highest level of existential agency.

### American Men and Women Report Similarly High Existential Agency

Overall, the majority of Americans (63%) agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. And this is the case for both men and women.

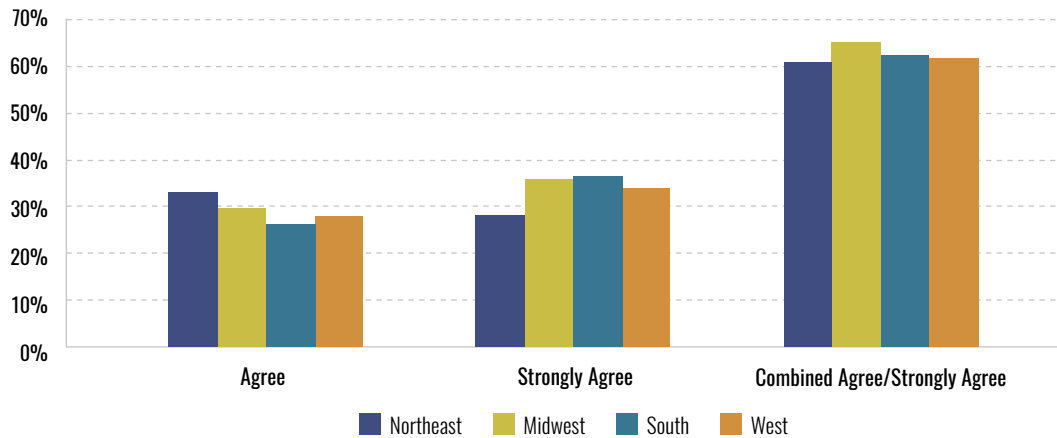
**Figure 1 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY FOR AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN:**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Americans Living in Different Regions of the Country Report Similarly High Existential Agency

The Midwest is the region with the highest percentage of Americans who agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life, but there is very little difference across regions.

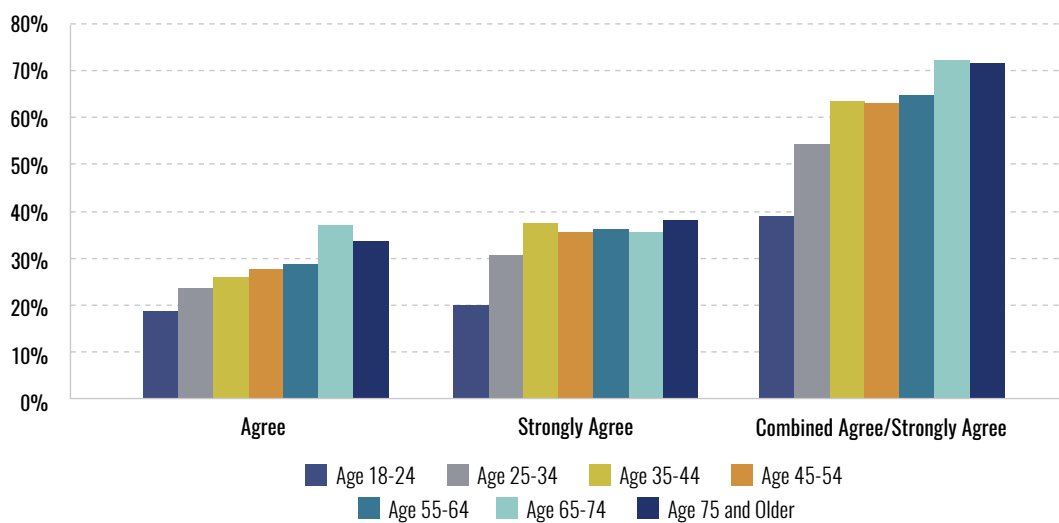
**Figure 1 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY ACROSS AMERICA:**  
*“I have the power to live a meaningful life”*



## Older Adults Report Higher Existential Agency Than Younger Adults

More than 70% of Americans in the two oldest age groups (65–74 and 75 and older) but less than 40% of 18–24-year-old Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. In general, young adults report lower existential agency than middle-aged and older adults.

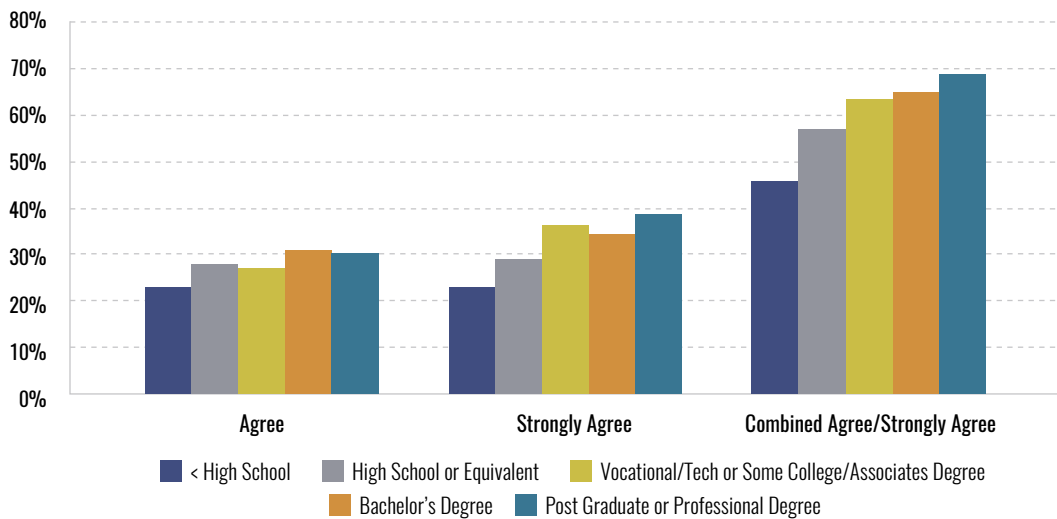
**Figure 3 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY ACROSS GENERATIONS:**  
*“I have the power to live a meaningful life”*



## Americans with Higher Levels of Education Report Higher Existential Agency

Education is positively associated with existential agency. Less than 50% of Americans who lack a high school level education agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. For every other group, the majority of Americans report high existential agency.

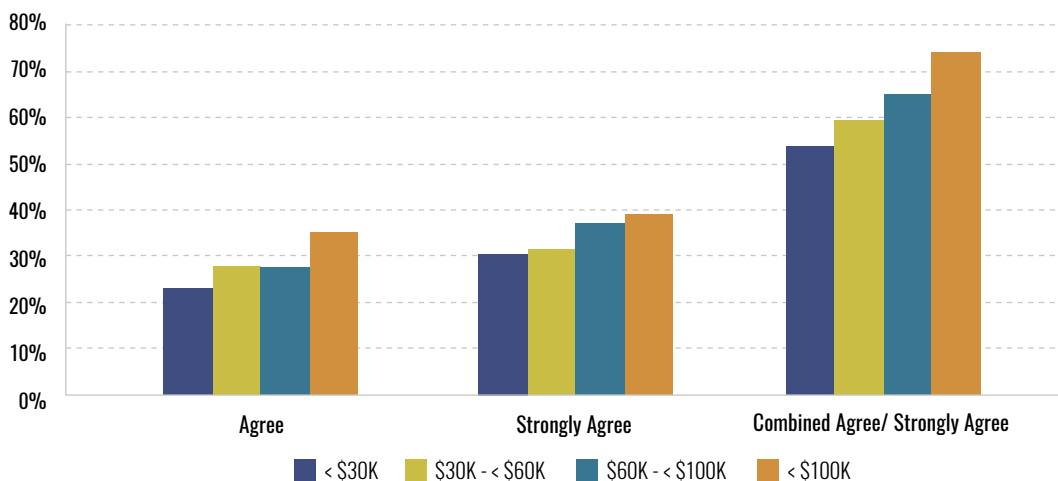
**Figure 4 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EDUCATION:**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Americans in Higher Income Households Report Higher Existential Agency

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of Americans with household incomes over \$100,000 per year agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. However, the majority of Americans in every income group report high existential agency.

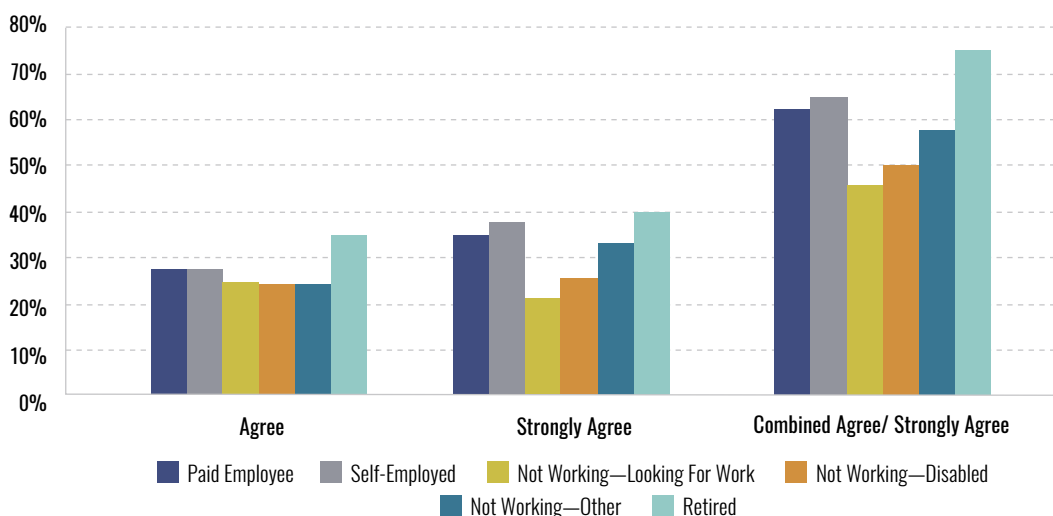
**Figure 5 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME:**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Employed and Retired Americans Report Higher Existential Agency Than Americans Who are Not Working

Three-quarters of retired Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Among non-retired Americans, work is positively associated with existential agency. More than 60% of working Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Only 46% of Americans who are out of work but are looking for work agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Among non-retired Americans, self-employed workers are the most likely to agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

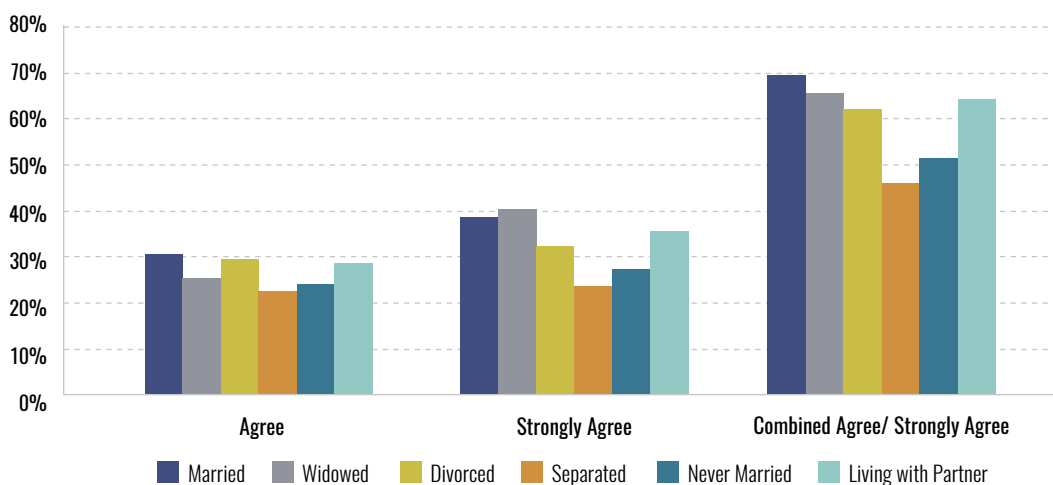
**Figure 6 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS:**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Married Americans are More Likely to Report High Existential Agency Than Unmarried, Separated, or Divorced Americans

Nearly 70% of married Americans, just over half of never-married Americans, and less than half of currently separated Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

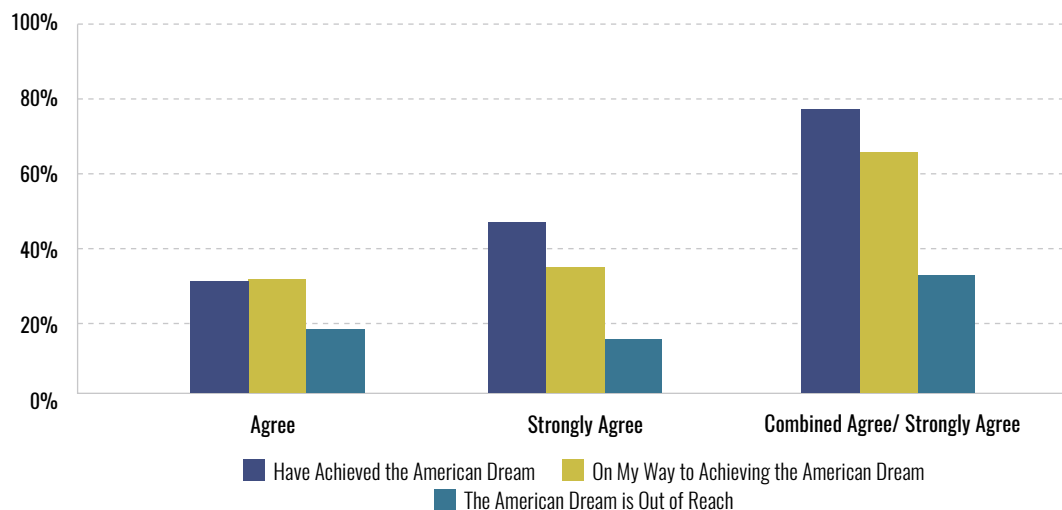
**Figure 7 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS:**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Americans Who Believe They Have Achieved the American Dream or Are on Their Way to Achieving It are Much More Likely to Report High Existential Agency Than Those Who Believe the American Dream is Out of Reach

More than three-quarters of Americans who believe they have achieved the American Dream and two-thirds of Americans who believe they are on their way to achieving the American Dream agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Only one-third of Americans who believe the American Dream is out of reach agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

**Figure 8 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM:**  
*“I have the power to live a meaningful life”*



## CONCLUSION: EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROGRESS

The majority of Americans report high existential agency. Sixty-three percent agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Men and women and people living in different regions of the country report similarly high existential agency. There are, however, notable differences across other groups. Many of these differences are consistent with past research connecting meaning in life variables to economic and social variables.

For instance, my colleague Andrew Abeyta and I have found that the more people believe they can meet their financial needs, the more they view their lives as meaningful.<sup>19</sup> This might help explain why education, employment, and household income are all related to existential agency. People may be more likely to view themselves as having the power to live a meaningful life if they are engaged in the type of educational and work-related behaviors that make them financially self-sufficient or put them on the path to financial self-sufficiency. Importantly, the relationship between these variables and existential agency should go both directions. Education, employment, and financial security may increase existential agency, but, critically, existential agency should also increase success in these domains because it promotes self-regulation and goal-oriented behavior. In other words, existential agency should both encourage and be encouraged by goal pursuit and progress. However, it is important to note that in the current survey it is impossible to determine any causal relationships.

The same analysis is relevant to family and community life. The current survey suggests a connection between marriage and existential agency. In previous research, I have found that married individuals report higher meaning in life than non-married individuals.<sup>20</sup> More broadly, my colleagues and I have found that Americans report that family and other close relationships are the most important sources of meaning in their lives.<sup>21</sup> Healthy social bonds (e.g., marriage) might increase existential agency but existential agency should also promote the types of behaviors that cultivate healthy social bonds. Indeed, previous studies my colleagues and I have conducted find that when people think about their past life experiences that generate meaning, they subsequently become more motivated to pursue social relationship goals and feel more confident that they can achieve these goals.<sup>22</sup>

The results of the current survey also suggest a connection between beliefs about the American Dream and existential agency. Research conducted by the Archbridge Institute<sup>23</sup> indicates that the majority of Americans believe freedom of choice in how to live, having a good family life, and being able to retire comfortably are essential components of the American Dream. Existential agency supports the types of goals and behaviors that would help Americans achieve these distinct features of the American Dream.

The survey results do suggest at least one potential major challenge to human progress and societal well-being. Only a minority of young adults agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. This finding might seem counterintuitive given that young adults are generally viewed as idealistic and energetic, and have much of their lives ahead of them. In addition, thanks to social, scientific, and technological progress, young Americans today have greater access to accumulated knowledge and a wide range of opportunities that allow them to reach their full potential. However, the current findings are consistent with other research indicating that young adults are vulnerable to an existential crisis of anxiety, pessimism, and social disengagement.

Young adults are increasingly anxious and afraid. For instance, research finds that anxiety has broadly increased in the United States over the past decade, is most common among young adults, and has increased more rapidly among young adults.<sup>24</sup> This is a barrier to agency and ultimately human progress because people are less inclined to take risks, explore unfamiliar ideas, be tolerant of those who are different, and have the confidence and optimistic mindset needed to take on big challenges when they are anxious and afraid.

Our increasingly security-focused culture is part of the problem.<sup>25</sup> Parents today regulate and monitor their children's lives much more than parents of previous generations, which can undermine the development of an agentic mindset.<sup>26</sup> For instance, research finds that helicopter parenting predicts reduced self-efficacy (belief in one's own ability to execute an action or goal) among college students.<sup>27</sup> And today's teenagers and young adults are less likely than those of past generations to engage in a range of activities that promote independence, such as working for pay, getting a driver's license, dating, and spending time with friends without adult supervision.<sup>28</sup>

Colleges and universities may also be part of the problem. The academic institutions that should be helping students develop an agentic mindset may be failing in this mission and instead encouraging students to embrace a victimhood mindset.<sup>29</sup> A national survey from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) found that 60% of college and university students report having not shared their perspective on an issue for fear of how others would respond.<sup>30</sup> In a recent national survey<sup>31</sup> of American college and university students that my colleague John Bitzan and I conducted for the Sheila and Robert Challey Institute for Global Innovation and Growth at North Dakota State University, we found that 60% of students believe their fellow students should be reported to the university if they say something that other students find offensive.

Our survey further suggests that colleges and universities are not inspiring students to approach the future with agency and optimism. Specifically, we asked students to respond to a number of questions based on what they have learned in college so far. Only 44% of college students report that they are optimistic about their ability to make a difference in the world, based on what they have learned in college. Only 26% of students report that they are optimistic about the future of the world, and only 24% are optimistic about the future of the United States. Just over half (52%) are optimistic about their own future. And only half of college students report that based on what they have learned in college, they believe the world has generally been getting better over the last 50 years concerning issues such as extreme poverty, life expectancy, hunger, and literacy. There has been considerable progress on all of these issues, but many students do not appear to be learning about it.

Other surveys suggest young American adults are losing faith in their fellow Americans. According to a survey<sup>32</sup> by the Pew Research Center, adults under the age of 30 are more likely than adults in older age groups to believe people only look out for themselves, would take advantage of them if they got the chance, and generally cannot be trusted. In fact, according to Pew, nearly half of young American adults can be classified as low trusters—people who see others as selfish, exploitative, and untrustworthy.

Young adults may also be disengaging from the superordinate national identity that helps bring Americans with diverse backgrounds and beliefs together with shared purpose. In a survey<sup>33</sup> I conducted with the Archbridge Institute and the Sheila and Robert Challey Institute for Global Innovation and Growth, we found that the vast majority of US adults (87%) are proud to be American, and American pride unites people across different groups. For instance, nearly 100% of Republicans and 82% of Democrats are proud to be American. Over 80% of Americans in every racial/ethnic category reported being proud to be American. A similar story emerged across religious groups, and across levels of income and education. However, in the previously mentioned survey of American college and university students conducted by the Sheila and Robert Challey Institute for Global Innovation and Growth, a different story emerged. Only 56% of American college and university students report being proud to be American, and there is a major ideological divide as 86% of conservative students but only 40% of liberal students are proud to be American. A larger YouGovAmerica survey<sup>34</sup> provides further evidence that younger American adults are less inclined than older age groups to be proud to be American; 80% of adults who are 55 and over are proud to be American compared to 47% of those 18–24 years old. In general, the younger the age group, the lower the national pride.

Perhaps existential agency naturally increases with age as part of normal adult development and life experience and there is little reason to be concerned about the observed lower existential agency among young adults. The current analysis does not allow for comparisons between today's young adults and young adults of past generations. However, the broader picture that is emerging of young adults being increasingly anxious, less independent, and perhaps more pessimistic, less trusting of others, and more disconnected from a shared national identity suggests that our society should focus more on preparing the next generation to be existential agents who are inspired to continue the cause of human progress.

There are a number of current initiatives that could prove instructive for promoting existential agency. Humans start building their mental models of how the physical and social worlds work at an early age, so encouraging young children to explore the physical and social worlds, take reasonable risks, and solve their own problems puts them on the path to developing the psychological characteristics that will help them live an existentially agentic life. Lenore Skenazy and her team at Let Grow are doing vital work in this area. Let Grow is an organization that offers thought leadership, school programs, research, and legislative advocacy focused on countering the growing safety-focused culture that encourages children to feel fearful and fragile. It promotes free play and related activities that give kids the chance to grow as curious, resilient,

resourceful, and independent people. Parents, schools, and other institutions involved in preparing young people for the future would benefit from adopting and building on ideas promoted by Let Grow.

Higher education also has an important role to play. At university graduation ceremonies, it is common for students to be given speeches about how they can go out and make a difference in the world with their college education, but most students do not appear to be getting that message or the types of educational experiences that support this message throughout their college education. As previously mentioned, a minority of students are optimistic about the future and their ability to make a difference, based on what they have learned in college. At my university, through research, outreach, and student programs, the Sheila and Robert Challey Institute for Global Innovation and Growth is working to promote a bottom-up and agency-oriented approach to solving big societal challenges. This approach emphasizes that individuals can make meaningful contributions to the world through entrepreneurship, innovation, community engagement, and related activities.

Broader cultural messages that inspire agency are also crucial. Here at the Archbridge Institute, we recently launched *Profectus Magazine* as an effort to counter the outrage, fear, pessimism, and victimhood being promoted by many media outlets, academics, and social commentators. Our goal is to offer a more positive, hopeful, and solution-focused analysis, one that recognizes our ability as humans to come together, create, innovate, and persevere in the face of adversity in order to build a better tomorrow. The more our society recognizes and celebrates the ways that humans have engaged their existential agency to improve their own lives and the lives of others, the more young Americans will recognize their own potential and strive to realize it.

The current survey offers a snapshot of existential agency in America. Efforts to understand, promote, and accelerate human progress will benefit from future research and analysis addressing the psychology of human progress and the specific role that the human need for meaning in life may play in solving the challenges of our time and improving the world for future generations.

## SURVEY METHODOLOGY

For this survey we partnered with NORC at the University of Chicago and its AmeriSpeak® panel. AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. The nationally representative sample consisted of 2,005 respondents. The survey was conducted June 24–28, 2021.



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