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Comparing Generations

by Stephanie Christian

(English 1102)

INTRODUCTION

As I started doing research for this paper, I was thinking in terms of looking at different generations to see how their youth or maturity affected how they behaved, to see if that had an effect on their relationships with each other. Additionally, based on the results of that study, I will demonstrate how similar the generation gaps/conflicts of different eras really are.

I found this concept quite interesting and as I continued to do the research I became more and more intrigued. I will be looking at various relationships in a variety of literary forms, from short stories and poems to books, sociological studies and even better....personal experience!

My research has primarily been in the area of behavior relative to music, dress, expectations and attitudes of self. I will separate out the so called “younger” generation, which can be the current group known as the Millennials, the ones before them known as Generation X (Gen X for short), and going way back to the Baby Boomers/Hippies-now THAT’S a flashback! My research will identify the different forms of behavior of all of these groups.

As I begin to unravel the data collected through my research, I will show how the specific information collected can be used in a very general way when discussing generation gaps and conflicts. When one has a better understanding of what influences people in their environment, how their maturity level affects the way they behave, and how social structure plays into attitudes, it is very easy to spot potential conflicts between people in everyday life or in a story or poem.

For everyday life situations, this basic understanding can make a difference in the outcome of a relationship of your own or others (if you have the ability to counsel them). With regard to literature, you will have a better understanding of the bigger picture of a story which will afford you better comprehension of what you read.

THE YOUNGER GENERATION-Millennials

The current younger generation is referred to as the Millennial generation, born between 1977 and 1994, ranges in age from 16 to 33. According to the publication, American Generations, they are considered a new Baby Boom generation, based on the fact that “In 1977, a new birth boom began when 3.3 million babies were born-159,000 more than in the previous year” (8).

This group of young adults is targeted by the advertisers as they are not only a large percentage of the buying population “...25% of total population” (8) but they are also quite a diversified group. “Asians, blacks, and Hispanics account for a large share of Millennials...” (8).

MUSIC

The music for the Millennials has consisted of a variety of heavy metal rock, hip-hop, R & B and country, with groups like Eminem, Kanye West, Beyonce, Tim McGraw and Keith Urban. It appears as though this group mostly enjoys more the aspect of the sounds of their music and the interaction with friends when listening to it, like dancing. When it comes to country music, however, they do listen to the words as those artists tell stories in their lyrics. My daughter is one of the Millennials, and she shared some of these insights with me.

DRESS

The type of dress for this group is varied. They are the generation that began wearing prison pants, mostly the males, where the pants are worn low over the buttocks with the underwear showing. This fad was started by a gang member in prison, hence the name. The females wear some very provocative clothes, such as very low riding jeans and midriff tops (both of which are often a size too small), a fad started by musical artists like Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera.

According to Jared Jackson from Popular Culture "...many teenage girls now wear low-rider jeans that expose their midriff, and sport tattoos and navel piercings" (94). This is not exclusive to the teenagers, however. My daughter, who is 28 years old, wears these types of jeans and midriff tops, but does not "sport a tattoo or navel piercing"... THANK GOODNESS!

There are differing opinions with regards to the effects of wearing the types of clothes this group wears. There are the adults who feel that what the youth are wearing may cause them harm. In particular, when the females wear such provocative clothing, they may be setting themselves up for unwanted sexual advances which can lead to unprotected sex, pregnancy or STDS (sexually transmitted diseases). Jared Jackson hammers this thought by saying, "Ladies, the way you dress does matter. Please put on some decent clothes" (97). "...at least dress modestly for the sake of those around you. There are men who will be weakened by your display. And if you don't care about them, at least have the dignity and self-respect to not advertise yourself as a cheap sex object" (98).

Then there are the adults who do not feel that the way one dresses will harm you in any way. According to Rhonda Hollen, "Prudish adults should not criticize or legislate against teen fashions they think sexualize children" (99). She goes on to say, "...that such attire is merely a fashion statement, not a sign of social degradation" (99).

EXPECTATIONS AND ATTITUDES

The Millennials appear to be a very confident group. As mentioned earlier, they are a diverse youth market and their technological abilities set them apart from previous generations. They are always connected worldwide at the click of a computer key, whether they are looking for something, someone, or current news. A survey identified in an article in 2006 by American Generations indicated that 27% of Millennials get their news from the Internet (34). They expect to be successful in whatever they do. They are driven and competitive. The article in American Generations also states, "Millennials have strength in numbers-and they know it" (8). It goes on to say, "...their voices are heard when they take up a cause" (8).

The Millennials are viewed by many as having very liberal views on most topics. They are thought to have the potential to be rather rebellious. However, I personally witnessed the growth of the Millennials through my daughters and their friends. I saw them take up healthy life choices, show respect to others, including parents (well...most of the time!), and have a desire to give back. They seem to care about the group as a whole, as opposed to themselves (which I like to call the "me-factor"). They hang out with many of the same friend groups they had as young children, my daughter included! Her group calls themselves the "Elmhurst 8" because there were 8 of them that stuck together through high school, college and beyond, even though many have moved away. It's really a beautiful thing to see. Jeff Gordinier puts it so well in his book X Saves the World, when he says, "Like their parents, the boomers, there was nothing they revered more than the hive" (70).

THE YOUNGER GENERATION-Gen X

Now let's look at the next previous generation known as Generation X. This group was born between 1961 and 1981, ranging in age from 29 to 49. This group has struggled like a baby emerging from a womb. They were the first generation to be raised in the age of postmodernism, as described in the article "Generation X" (1). Their parents generally had values that were unbiased and impartial, but the world around them was changing to one where values took on a more one-sided

view. It is widely believed that this struggle was the foundation for the label given to them as well as their behaviors.

MUSIC

As this group emerged onto the music scene, they popularized Disco and Punk Rock. This was to be their music identity. However, it did not last long as it was mocked by the Boomers and pushed underground. They went on to listen to grunge rock and alternative music with bands like Nirvana, Guns & Roses, Prince, and Hip-Hop groups like Snoop Doggy Dogg and Puff Daddy. The lyrics in many of these songs were, as Judy Isaksen said in “Generation X,” “...furious, angst-ridden” (4); “...against the establishment and a decaying society-issues with which X-ers could identify” (4) and “...rappers speak of the issues of the day...” (4).

DRESS

For the Gen X group there was no one particular fashion statement being made, other than the very fact that they wore whatever they wanted. While they did introduce such items as skinny jeans and kitten heels (which I personally love!), they could be seen wearing polo shirts, khakis, bowling shirts and prairie skirts. They are the group that began pushing the limits on under dressed fashions, like low riding jeans and midriff tops. According to the article in “Generation X”, their favorite T-shirt slogan is “... ‘NO FEAR,’ and it is also representative of the contradictions of their culture...” (2).

EXPECTATIONS AND ATTITUDES

Many have viewed this generation as being lazy, apathetic, whiny slackers. “Generation X” alleges that “...the title of the 1991 movie, ‘*Slackers*’, has been used to label members of Generation X...” (4). The article also indicates that “...social ills like the rise in teen suicide, widespread homelessness....the AIDS epidemic....downsizing workforce....have been the realities of the world as Generation X has come of age” (2).

In response to the negativity towards their generation, they have solid proof to the contrary with folks like Jerry Yang and David Filo who jointly founded Yahoo!, and the youngest president of The Sierra Club, an environmental lobbying group, Adam Werbach, a Gen X-er. Michael Kinsley, from the boomer generation, writes in Generations Apart, “X-ers are right to suspect that boomer complaints about them are based largely on resentment. No one was ever supposed to be younger than we are” (20).

THE OLDER GENERATION-BABY BOOMERS

Finally, let’s take a look at the final group that I have researched, the generation known as the Baby Boomers. This group was born between 1946 and 1964, ranging in age from 46 to 64 (now THAT’S a bit odd!). The middle group of the boomers was labeled “hippies” and they were proud of it! This group is by far the most written about, popularized group ever. From their general behavior, music, dress and attitudes, this group has gotten attention, set trends, and changed the world in many ways. Joe Austin put it well, “In the aftermath of the 1960s’ youth rebellion, youth culture became a normalized feature of life in many developed nations...” (6). This group will be my older generation focus. Now, the fact that **I** am a Boomer has nothing to do with the above statements, and I will try and hold my bias!

MUSIC

As this generation came of age to be seen and heard by the world, the music was beginning the rock and roll era. As the middle group of this generation became teens, the Beatles had arrived, changing the music scene forever. This generation also had bands and musicians like The Beach

Boys, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, and The Grateful Dead, to name a few. The lyrics ranged from innocent car drives on ocean highways to rules about sharing marijuana and everything in between.

DRESS

The mode of dress for this generation was mostly relaxed, comfy, some may say sloppy or unkempt. This generation actually started the low ride jean look, calling it hip huggers. The jeans also had bell bottoms which today's fashion term is flared bottoms. They wore modest midriff tops (is that an oxymoron?!). Prairie skirts, floral peasant tops and head bandanas were all standard items in their closets. Oh, and let's not forget the flowers in their hair!

EXPECTATIONS AND ATTITUDES

This generation, the Boomer/Hippies, were viewed as classless, lazy, unclean, strange, and disrespectful, and that's just what their parents said! This group willingly accepted some of these terms, like classless, but as a societal term, meaning that they chose not to be identified as a particular class of society, "...a new classless society of sincerity and trust..." (Hippies 1). This group wanted to change the world one hippie at a time.

Unfortunately, as part of this quest, this young group began experimenting with drugs as part of their way of being free to do "whatever, whenever." "By blowing 'one's mind,' drugs allowed one to see through the fake values of middle-class materialism and into the profound layers of one's innermost being" (Hippies 1). "...[H]ippies whipped up their own philosophy of natural living, easy sexual and social relations, sincerity, and hedonism..." (Hippies 1) "...To the hippies, 'squares' were 'uptight,' out of touch with their feelings and with each other..." (Hippies 1).

The Viet Nam War was also at its peak during these years, and it was a focal point for the unruliness and so called disrespect that was exhibited through demonstrations in the streets and on college campuses across the country. Mark Kurlansky writes, "Armed with clubs, mounted British police charged with brutality rarely seen in London. Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones was there and wrote about it in 'Street Fighting Man'" (153). It is during this time that the peace symbol gained popularity, as the demonstrators against the war used the peace sign (first 2 fingers in the air) to show their desire for the war to end and all to love each other in peace.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I set out on a quest to determine if the generation gaps in different eras were similar or different; if their maturity and environment played a role in their relationships, and how a better understanding of this theory can make us better people and better learners. It is my opinion that the generation gaps are very similar in their basic issues with one another.

In looking at the behaviors that I researched; (music, dress and expectations/attitudes), the individual, specific problem of the moment may be different between each of the groups, but the underlying issue seems to be the same. When referring to special groups or cohorts, Karl Mannheim writes in "Intergenerational Relations" that, "...younger cohorts try to impose their views on society." "The older cohort, on the other hand, has a major stake in preserving the existing social order" (1). Let's take a look at that theory.

The music, lyrics and how they were presented by the artists were different for each group.

The Millennials music (most of it anyway) is viewed as loud boom, boom, boom rap with no lyrics that one can understand. In reality, most of the group doesn't care about the lyrics. They care more about the sound, they can dance to it, feel moved by it and it makes them feel good.

The Gen X-ers music was viewed as depressing with scary lyrics that may make young people do bad things (like suicide). However, the lyrics were merely stating what was physically happening in their real world, nothing more.

The Boomers/Hippies music was viewed as nonsense with lyrics that had no meaning and

artists who looked like Biblical folks. The group liked to think of it as a way to spread the word about love and peace to the world. If they didn't listen to it through demonstrations, maybe they would get it through music.

The way the groups dressed was also different yet it wasn't. The adults in their lives complained about how they looked, yet they all probably wore the same trend, just a different style of it.

The Millennials wear provocative, revealing clothing and pants that fall down...well they look like they should.

The Gen X-ers wore slightly less provocative, revealing clothes than the Millennials, but it was the same trend.

The Boomers/Hippies started the whole thing with their hip hugger jeans and tied in the front midriff shirts!

The expectations/attitudes of each group were significantly different as a result of their social environments combined with their immaturity.

The Millennials are looked at as being rebellious, too liberal, and wasting too much time on technology. They view themselves as caring individuals, concerned about the well being of all, and constantly staying on top of local and world happenings through the use of technology like the internet and FaceBook.

The Gen-Xers were labeled lazy slackers with no drive. Unfortunately, they had more societal issues affecting them, which seemed to keep beating them down, giving the appearance of not going anywhere. Their music was ridiculed and went underground; their label "slackers," was from a movie about their supposed behavior; and suicide, divorce, and job downsizing all played a role, yet they still kept pushing forward, trying new ways to make something of their lives. Just remember the names Yahoo! And Sierra Club!

The Boomers/Hippies were also called lazy as well as classless and disrespectful. They wanted the world to know that they just wanted to "give peace a chance" as quoted from a John Lennon song. They wanted a better way of life, to be more carefree, have easy social relations and to be in touch with themselves and each other.

In closing, if everyone just took a step back for a minute and put themselves in the other person's place, they would realize that the single, common thread in all relationship conflicts is a lack of or unwillingness to understand and respect each other. Everyone wants to be special. Everyone wants to do something new and different. Everyone at some time is young and immature. If everyone has all of the same issues and goals at some point in their lives, there should not be conflict between generations. The underlying reason why there is conflict is because people forget what they did when they were young. "Since the interests of different groups are not always mutually compatible, there is social conflict" (Generations 6). They don't try to remember and understand. At the same time, immaturity lends itself to sometimes making bad choices...like clothing styles, use of drugs and alcohol, and a lack of understanding of social issues except at face value. Understanding parents have the ability to explain and teach these things to help young people get through that time in their lives. It is better to have understanding than conflicts over everything.

The theory of better understanding can also make one more scholarly. Just think about how much more meaning will be derived from literature alone. Here are some examples.

I recently read the fictional short story, "The Red Convertible" by Louise Erdrich. It is a story about two brothers growing up, driving around in an old car they restored; one brother went off to war, came back and died (presumably by suicide). Looking more specifically at the relationships between the brothers, as well as the environment they were in at the time, I see a very different story. I see two guys making some bad choices because they are immature, and an environment that destroys them. They spent an entire summer driving all over the place in the car, not working or taking on any responsibilities at home. I see a young man who was drafted off to a war that society

created not him. He did his duty and went, but came back with more war baggage than he could handle and his behaviors showed it. He spent hours staring into nothingness and had angry flare-ups out of nowhere. Then the ultimate behavior was walking into a dangerous body of water fully clothed knowing he would not make it out alive. Behaviors and choices caused by immaturity, society and the environment.

I read a poem, "Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde. It's a poem about a young teenager who seems to be whining about things she doesn't like about herself and her life. She complains about her skin, the boy she likes not being interested, not knowing how to dance, not being on the Math Team, and wearing braces. She also talks rather melodramatically about dying before morning, before graduation or before she grows up; and her mom always being in a closed room. When looking more closely at the relationship between her and her mother, there doesn't seem to be one. She's an immature 14 year old, without a good relationship with her mom, at a time in her life when hormones are raging and the world seems so big and scary to her. Then she appears to be a very sad and lonely girl needing some help. Behaviors caused by relationships and environment.

Finally, I read a satirical play, "Beauty" by Jane Martin. It's a story about two friends, Carla, a beautiful model and Bethany, a bright novelist with a great job. Bethany finds a bottle with a genie in it, tests it and races to tell Carla that it is real. She needs help deciding what her third and last wish should be. At first, Carla's all about the money but Bethany really wants to be like Carla. She wants her beauty and glamorous life style. Bethany tells Carla, "Beauty is the real deal. You are the center of any moment of your life. People stare. Men flock" (1108). Carla's response is, "I can't have a conversation without men coming on to me. I have no privacy. I get hassled on the street" (1108). She goes on to say, "Well, it's not what I want." "I have never read a whole book." "I leave dinner parties right after the dessert because I'm out of conversation" (1108). "I barely exist outside a mirror! You don't want to be me" (1109). Carla begs Bethany not to make this outrageous wish, but it's too late. In the end, they change places and become each other. They both had an immature view of themselves and their self image. This is also societal in that the media portrays beauty and glamour as such a perfect way to be. Media also depicts wealth as the only way to get anywhere in life. So they felt a need, or out of jealousy wanted to have what the other had. Ironically, the play ended with Carla indicating that they now have what everyone wants and it wasn't brains or beauty it's just a different set of problems.

As you can see, life can be so very complicated. Relationships between generations, between family members, between friends, can be contentious, hurtful, confusing, depressing. We need to have a general appreciation for one another and what we all have to offer. We need to be more understanding of each other's position in life and choices that are made.

There are so many things in this world and life that we cannot control. With more respect and understanding, there will be far fewer conflicts, something we CAN control.

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