

PERSPECTIVE: WINDOWS INTO A GENERATION DIVIDED

Throughout this creative process, I examined the interpersonal relationships between myself, my parents, and my grandparents. In so doing, I have found that my worldview is vastly different than my grandparents'. What differentiates Millennials from our Gen X parents, and Boomer grandparents? Applying the theory of "The Generational Divide," we find that between each generation there is particular and crucial misunderstanding. This theory, for example, gives rise to the social construct of the "rebellious youth."

I believe you can tell a lot about a person by how they live and by what they view as "necessities." I utilized this idea in the creation of my sculpture. Each floor has a different vibe in accordance with the way a particular generation lived and was viewed by previous generations. My main area of focus is the most recent three generations.

The viewing of the piece is integral to understanding it. You can only catch glimpses of the interior of the house through windows. This incomplete understanding gained from these glimpses echoes the gaps between generations. I hope the viewer might question how they idealize their own generation and criticize others.

Audrey

Years Change and We Remain the Same
A look inside the generational divide.

Audrey



Do you ever wish your parents had made different choices? Maybe, wish that they had made better decisions in parenting you and teaching you the ways of the world? Have you ever made the vow to be different than your parents, to make better decisions? If I were to tell you that these are probably the exact thoughts your parents had when they were young, would you believe me? Probably not, maybe because you believe your parents cannot possibly relate to you or your feelings. Perhaps they understand and can empathize with your situation more than you thought. I can almost assure you that your parents, although growing up in a different time, can relate to feeling a disconnect from their own parents. This is the cycle of generations. Every young generation feels that those before them cannot possibly relate to their situation and that they are alone in the world. If we did not feel this way we would not differentiate from our parents and branch off to become individuals. This essay is a look inside the three most current generations and how they have related to one another in their life times.

Of late I have found myself growing more and more independent from my parents. I have been thinking about the choices I would make in my parents' respective situations. In examining these feelings, I have discovered that I would have made vastly different decisions regarding divorce, familial retaliations, where we should live, and mine and my brother's education. I do not believe I would make different decisions because I necessarily disagree with all my parents have done, I actually do like where we are in the world, as of late, but I do believe I was just raised in a time with different value sets and events going on. I think that in the generational gap between my parents and me, I have seen the ideological and ethical differences in the choices we make when faced with similar situations.

I decided to look into the *Theory of Generations*, an idea articulated beautifully in William Strauss and Neil Howe's book, Generations (1991). They base their idea on the case study of the American People, ranging from the 1400s to the 21st century. Their theory of a four-stage cycle can be repeated through history to predict the generational tendencies and mannerisms in the future.

The *Generational Divide* is the concept of a gap in ideological beliefs and practices that happens due to divides in era and age. The separation of generations is based on shifts in belief and practice; this is how a new generation is named separate from its predecessor. Each generation is given a title. They are *Idealist*, *Reactive*, *Civic*, or *Adaptive*. These titles are given in a continuous cycle of four. Every four generations has a respective archetype. These archetypes dictate the reactions of generations to the happenings in their respective eras.

For a better understanding of the four-stage cycle I have included a chart copied from Strauss and Howe's book, *Generations*. It is a breakdown of how each generation in this study reacted to different stages and happenings in their lives:

	Baby Boomers	Thirteenth Generation	Millennials
Lifecycle Type:	Idealist	Reactive	Civic
Coming-of-age experience in a word:	sanctifying	alienating	empowering
Principal focus during their coming-of-age:	inner-world	whatever works best	outer-world
How they are perceived during their coming-of-age:	stormy	bad	good
Preoccupation as they rise to adulthood:	reflecting	competing	building
Attitude transition during midlife:	detached to judgmental	risk-seeking to exhausted	energetic to hubristic
Preoccupation as they rise to elderhood:	civilization	survival	community
How they are perceived as elders:	visionary, wise	lonely, caustic	busy, confident

	Baby Boomers	Thirteenth Generation	Millennials
Style of leadership:	righteous, austere	pragmatic, cautious	grand, expansive
How it is nurtured by prior generation(s):	relaxing	underprotective	overprotective
How it nurtures its children/gran children:	tightening	overprotective	relaxing
Positive Attributes	principled resolute creative	savvy perceptive practical	rational selfless competent
Negative Attributes	ruthless selfish arrogant	amoral pecuniary uncultured	overbold unreflective insensitive

The case study for my paper follows the most recent grouping of generations, which involves the Baby Boomers, the Thirteenth Generation or Gen X, and the Millennials or Gen Y. As a whole, this group is referred to as the Millennial Generational Cycle. Since we are seeing the Millennials come of age now, there is not a fourth generation to add to this particular study. A tentative name, however, for the generation to succeed the Millennials is the Homeland Generation (to be born from 2005 onwards for 17-26 years).

These three generations carry on the cycle stated previously: The Baby Boomers are the Idealist, the Thirteenth Gen. are Reactive, and the Millennials are Civic. The Homeland Gen. is to be Adaptive. The archetypes assigned to each of these generations dictates their take on life through their development into adulthood. It then explains how they will parent their own children to be in their kids' respective generations. This is how the cycle continues through history. A parent teaches their child how to be in the world, this child grows and develops new ideas and rebels against their parents' ideals, this child grows into an adult, who then overcompensates for their parents "mistakes" and this kick starts the cycle all over again.

I had to opportunity to interview a member of the Millennial generation, a peer of mine from Oxbow. I wanted to see if they felt a rift between their generation and their parents' and grandparents' generations. I also wanted to take a look into if they can empathize with why their parents act the way they do.

Q — Have you ever felt that your parents didn't understand you?

A — *Hell yeah.*

Q — What about, specifically?

A — *I think that parents underestimate the amount of stress that kids are under, and push kids to do a lot, and say that if we can't achieve everything that is expected of us, we're just lazy.*

Q — Have you had any conversations with your parents where you felt that was manifested to an extreme?

A — *Yeah, like when I would be very stressed, or like not be able to really get my work done, they would say it's because I'm slacking off, not because I have too much on my plate.*

Q — And do you think they should be able to relate in some way? I mean, because they were teenagers once, too. Do you feel they somehow forgot what its like to be in that situation?

A — *I think the problem is more that they don't understand that growing up now is very different than growing up when they were kids. So, they're never going to understand the problems because it's a whole different world, and even if they did remember what the world was like when they were a kid, they're going to invalidate both their own feelings and how kids, now-a-days, feel.*

Q — What kinds of topics do you feel you can't bring up to your parents? And why do you feel they're "off-limits" in some sense?

A — *I think a lot of times it's hard to talk to parents about rules and things they don't want you to do, because theres not really a mutual respect, or understanding, of why you want to do certain things. It's not like parents want to hear your side. They just create these rules and you don't really have any say in them.*

Q — Are there any specific rules you would name or it more of a general sense that parents don't care how you view-

A — *I mean, kind of stereotypical things that parents don't want their kids doing, like partying, dating, and stuff like that.*

Q — Have you ever felt anything similar towards your grandparents. That they didn't really 'get' the era, the time, or the struggles of being a Millennial?

A — *I actually think that my grandma is the person who's most interested in the actual opinions of the Millennials. She'll always ask me and my brother our opinions on things and how we would do them differently, and is actually very genuinely interested in our view of the world. [She] kind of has a lot of faith in us. Whereas, parents are more [expecting] for us to continue the world as they want it.*

Q — And do you think maybe our parents will grow out of this when they get to be our grandparents' age?

A — *I think they might, but they are generally more critical of the way we do things.*

Q — Do you think that has anything to do with their prior generations doing the same to them?

A — *I mean, yeah, probably. I think parents, a lot of times, when they're parenting, tend to parent in a way that is the opposite to the things they didn't like that their parents did. But, it ends up being at the other extreme.*

In conducting this interview I came to a realization that I had heard many of the same parental complaints previously. I sensed a general feeling of being misunderstood by one's parents in my generation, something my parents have attested to feeling with their own parents. This parallel between generations ignited my interest in delving into why children feel a lapse in understanding between themselves and their parents and why it keeps happening. My overarching question for this essay is, "Why have parents not been able to dismantle this Generation divide?" I want to know why the bridge between children and their parents has not been crossed yet.

To reach the answer to this question I need to explain the basis of my chosen generations, the ones I feel are most relevant to the present time period. My focus, as stated previously, is: the Baby Boomers (grandparents to Millennials), the Thirteenth Generation (parents to Millennials), and Millennials.

The Baby Boomers were born between 1943 and 1960. As an Idealist generation, these babies were born to become the prophets, speaking out and sharing their opinions. They were

born to take what they were given in the world and turn it into greatness. Theirs was the generation of high hopes.

These “Boom” babies were born toward the end of what Strauss and Howe call an “Era of Crisis”. This means that previous generations, the Silent and G.I.’s, bore the Baby Boomers to a world overcome by a climate of extreme social change and global unrest. The first wave of Boomers happened to be one of the forerunners of this change.

The Boom was said to be the most politically aware generation as a whole, with the ability to make or break politicians. They were deemed “Political Sirens”, tempting politicians, then leading them to their demise, articulated so in *Generations* (1991). As adults, and now as seniors, this generation takes control in such movements. These were the teens and adults to protest the drafting to Vietnam: these were the children who rebelled against not just their parents, but the world their parents created in their own cycle. “Boomers found their parents’ world in need of a major spiritual overhaul, even in creative destruction” (Strauss and Howe *Generations*. 1991). They were a generation described almost universally as too self-absorbed to be interested in what had worked for their predecessors. Christopher Lasch, a Harvard educated American historian, moralist, and social critic, deemed theirs the “culture of narcissism”. This manifested itself in the Boom’s lack of linkages to spouses, children, corporations, and jobs as they rose to adulthood. There seemed to be a sense of apprehension when faced with permanence and commitment to any one thing. This created a community-less lifestyle for the generation. They relied more on the self than on the community and thus left the community out of their realm of importance.

The Boomers were the first to break the cycle of the coming-of-age “Treadmill”, a concept very apparent in their parents’ *Silent Generation*. There was a predetermined way life works: you get an education at a certain age, get a job, get married, buy a house, then, have kids. This idea differed between men and women slightly, but not dramatically. The Boom, however, took this idea and ran from it. They were described as almost having an inner voice shout “STOP” at any idea of a binding agreement or decision.

Boomers grew with privilege all around them, being viewed as striking and highly intelligent individuals growing up in an economy that flourished after World War II. This led them to be self-indulgent and of high self-esteem in adulthood. However, in this realm of high self worth there still seemed to be this unnamed weight on the Boomer’s shoulders. In the words of a 1968 Radcliffe senior, “We do not feel like a cool, swinging generation— we are eaten up by an intensity that we cannot name.”

As an Idealist generation, the Boomer’s teaching and nurturing methods were directly related to that of the G.I and Silent generations who raised them. The teaching methods of the two, respectively, were relaxing and under-protective in nature. This relaxation in parenting style led the children of the Boom to nurture in an overprotective and constricting manner. This, then created children—the Thirteenth Generation—who were under-protective in their own teaching and created a generation of people who craved more structure and instruction, Millennials.

Ranging in birth years from 1961-1981 is the Thirteenth Generation, nicknamed Gen X. A group falling into the Reactive archetype, the Thirteenth are nomadic in nature and in relation to the world. They came of age in a time when they were alienated for their words and beliefs, and seen as a rebellious group of “ne’r-do-wellers”. Their early years as young adults was viewed as a bad time to them and other generations, with their “Stick it to the Man” attitude. They were a generation of risk seekers and risk takers. As they hit midlife, however, they became exhausted and weary, beaten down by their parents and grandparents.

Their young lives took place during the Cold War, a time of great fear and mistrust. They were surrounded by spy hunts and immigrant distrust, fearing that which they did not know or understand. Their parents and prior generations built bomb shelters and raised the children of the Thirteenth Generation on school bomb drills. This generation saw the assassination of a beloved president who was a symbol of change and national growth. The vast majority of these children cannot remember these events, but they remember the fear their parents instilled in them through their respective parenting styles and teaching methods. The parent generations of the Thirteenth, the Baby Boomers and Silent Generation, taught their children to constantly be on their toes and distrusting.

The Thirteenth generation accounts for the vast majority of the Millennial parents. Thirteeners' parents taught their children in such a way as to be described as overprotective and coddling. This was to overcompensate for the parenting style and over-preparedness in the parenting of the Baby Boomers and Silent adults. There was a generation of children who sensed their parents and grandparents did not have control of themselves, or of their country. They felt, exponentially more so than their predecessors, that life was gearing up to punish them down the line. These facts, coupled with the fear of national catastrophe—stronger in their generation than any before it, lower test scores, and the high crime rates, suicide rates, and substance abuse rates brought about a generation of extreme polarization against the Baby Boomers. Thirteeners' parents viewed them as a “lost” generation, one who preferred to not think, to be mentally numb. They were seen as disappointments in school, society, and home life—leading to quite low self-esteem in their adolescence.

The Thirteenth generation's members, however, view themselves through a different scope. They believe all their shortcomings are so because that is how they *must* be to survive in the world their parents and grandparents brought them into. They saw themselves as pragmatic, sharp-eyed, and of strong empathetic ability: they thought they were truly able to look outside themselves and understand the bigger picture.

This view of life came about, in part, due to the lack of security in a steady economic future. Thirteeners came of age in a time when college tuition and living rates, such as owning a house, began skyrocketing as salaries were being lowered. The price of living went up, general income went down. This was a generation of kids who took it upon themselves to be self-reliant, and independent individuals.

The Millennial generation was born between 1982 and the early 2000s (speculated to stop at 2004). We are a generation full of overcompensation. We are to make up for the let down the Thirteenth generation was to elder generations. As schoolchildren we were considered cute, cheerful, and scout-like in our similarities to our peers, “Not since the 1910's, when midlife Missionaries dressed child G.I.s in Boy Scout brown, have adults seen such advantage in making kids look alike and work together,” quote Strauss and Howe.

Millennials grow in a world dominated by a knowledge of and focus on childhood, with book titles such as, *Children Without Childhood*, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, *Our Endangered Children*, and *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, lining the shelves. The way children had been treated previously came into question. People started examining the consequences of divorce on a child, and the effects of latchkey households (a concept of the child being home alone all day after school while both parents work and go about their own lives). This reflection turned the Millennials' parent generation to reach out to other adults on the struggles of parenthood. These parents, however, think it better to cope and mask their difficulties from their children.

The Boomers play a large part in what the Millennials hear and understand as truth. From a young age, Millennials are told not to do drugs or drink alcohol, not to get pregnant young, not to have sex, and how they should dress or behave. There was this reversal in the idea of how a child can be in the world and when it is time to educate them on the morals and decisions that come with mind-altering substances. There is a common sense of responsibility among elders during the early Millennial cycles to be aware of what children were up to and how they perceived things.

We are a Civic generation, meant to take the world we were given and improve it in our views for the next generation of people. Being a 'Civic' cycle means we were raised in a 'tightening' manner that feels akin to suffocation for the majority of us. Taking this experience, we are to nurture in a relaxing manner, to see those we care for grow gently and in their own time. We are a Rational, Selfless, and Competent, generation, we want to see change enacted in a way that benefits the vast majority, not the 1%. We are the liberals and anti-Trump supporters in majority. We are the children asking for lower tuition on our education.

Our negative attributes, however, are our over boldness, unreflective nature, and insensitivity. We want a lot of change and we want it done fast: that is where our over boldness shines through the most. We are also a generation of people who want to appear strong and okay, even in the face of horrific circumstance. The insensitivity could be in the way we were raised, or what we were raised with. We are a generation who was alive for the fall of the Twin Towers and thus, the ignition of the 'War on Terror'. We are also a generation raised by parents who sought religion as a healer, leaving us less keen to religion and God as a concrete idea.

Through learning about overcompensation that is apparent in generation to generation teachings, we can look to correct this phenomena and hope to produce healthier members of society. This idea that each generation has a direct effect on their succeeding generation is how we can look into the future and see how best to parent it. We can see what choices will be made, regarding budding issues. We can see how generations ahead of time can fix their ways to produce healthy and engaged members of society. For example, people who view voting as not only a right but a responsibility, or people who feel they have the right to raise their voice and be met not with violence but with an open dialogue.

We must, as a country, look to your previous generations to see how best to care for our future generations. The Generational Divide is not making us any stronger as a united people. We disassociate from our parents and grandparents, as well as the worlds they have created and contributed to. This distancing causes rifts between our generation and theirs. If we are to better understand these concepts that preach teaching as the best method of understanding, we would be birthing generations of people who did not want to do the opposite of their parents. We would, instead, be giving new generations the tools to healthily raise their kids to then have their own thoughts and ideas about how the world should work and run. The idea is to not even think about making different choices than your parents. That is what needs to be eliminated from the cycle. This crippling idea of overcompensation being the safest method to parenting is infecting the fresh minds of new generations.

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