

# GENER(aLiz)ATIONS

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By Alfie Kohn

Sweeping generalizations about a huge group of people who share only the same race or ethnicity are widely viewed as offensive stereotypes. But sweeping generalizations about a huge group of people who share only their age (give or take a couple of decades)? Sure! Why not?

Baby Boomers were originally lumped together based on the fact that there were a lot of them (the birthrate having spiked after the War) and that they were lucky enough to come of age during a relatively affluent period. The idea that all of them – or, for that matter, all Gen X'ers or all Millennials – are also distinguished by a common political or psychological profile, a set of values or tastes, is an entirely different proposition. It's an idea that rational people should view with a generous measure of skepticism if only because each of these labels refers to something on the order of *80 million people*.

Marketing consultants are particularly shameless in tossing out declarations about characteristics that supposedly define each generation: They're paid – sometimes astronomical rates – to convince companies that they can carve the population into groups, the better to target each with a unique pitch for buying stuff they don't really need. The next thing you know, newsweeklies, academics, and your dinner party guests are entertaining themselves with similar generalizations –

ignoring the fact that variations (in beliefs and behaviors) *within* each generational cluster are typically far greater than those *between* them.

What takes this little game from merely silly to obnoxious is the following rule: You must attribute unflattering adjectives to cohorts younger than your own – even though yours was on the receiving end of similar disparagements not so long ago. Thus, those who came of age in the sixties were written off as longhaired, unamerican, potsmoking relativists with a deficient work ethic. At some point, though, they took the advice of disapproving passersby (“Get a job!”) and eventually decided that those younger than they – Generation X – were all slackers, unwilling to commit and unable to plan for the future.

Now those two groups finally have made common cause . . . to denigrate Millennials. Essentially everyone over the age of about forty has decided that today’s adolescents and young adults have been coddled and indulged by their parents with the result that they – how shall we put it? – have a deficient work ethic and are unable to commit or plan for the future. These entitled little pissants were overcelebrated as children, given easy A’s and trophies “just for showing up,” and are now unable to hack it in the Real World.

The absence of historical perspective here is frankly astonishing. Rarely do older folks pause and say, “Wait a second. If these snide truisms about young people that I’m confidently repeating aren’t all that different from what our elders said about us, might that be reason to question their validity?” With respect to the specific claim that “kids today” are spoiled and their parents permissive, I had fun a few years ago digging up multiple examples of how people were saying exactly the same thing about the previous generation, and the one before that, and the one before that, and the one before that. I conducted this backward journey through the decades in a book called *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*, which

also challenged the reactionary narrative about helicopter parents and kids with inflated self-esteem that has become the conventional wisdom.

Are young adults in the workplace more fragile and demanding than new hires of yesteryear? Here's Google's director of human resources:

Every single generation enters the work force and feels like they're a unique generation, and the generation that's one or two ahead of them looks back and says, 'Who are these weird, strange kids coming into the work force with their attitudes of entitlement and not wanting to fit in?' It's a cycle that's been repeated every 10 to 15 years for the last 50 years...If you look at what their underlying needs and aspirations are, there's no difference at all between this new generation of workers and my generation and my father's generation...We [all] want to be treated with respect, we want to have a sense of meaning and agency and impact, and we want our boss to just leave us alone so we can get our work done.

Nor is the commonality limited to the workplace. It turns out that Baby Boomers and Millennials have very similar life goals. And the authors whose research showed this to be true have also debunked conservative psychologist Jean Twenge's sweeping claims about Millennials (which, in her telling, almost always reflect poorly on them). For example, assertions about their supposedly higher levels of narcissism, which are catnip to the media, rest on embarrassing methodological errors.

Sometimes these bogus claims are due to a tendency to describe as generational shifts what are actually developmental differences: A sense of bravado isn't unusual in young adults, and that's always been true. The error comes from assuming it's uniquely true of *today's* young adults, which is how it might appear to older adults. At other times, what's

attributed to, say, Millennials as a group is actually a function of how life is changing for all of us. All those kids glued to social media, for example? That's not because of who the kids are; it's because they've come of age when the technology is available. In fact, a recent survey found that older adults actually use social media more than younger adults do.

The specific accusations leveled at today's teens and young adults – that they're entitled, overcelebrated “snowflakes” – are particularly ugly, empirically unsupported, and often animated by a political agenda. But my larger point is that we should be very cautious about offering *any* generalizations about an entire generation.

And by “we,” I mean all of us, including Millennials, lest they eventually start to sound like their elders in slinging calumnies at Generation Z (or whatever we end up calling the next cohort).

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