



An Explanation of Generations and Generational Changes

Generations. The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America’s Future. Jean M. Twenge; Atria Books; New York; 2023; ISBN 9781982181611; pp 554; \$32.50 (hardcover)

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The word *generation* is used in different contexts and has different meanings. Traditionally, it has been used to describe family relationships; however, now it is more frequently used to refer to social generations, that is, “those born around the same time who experienced roughly the same culture growing up” (p. 2). Most people are familiar with the names of various generations, such as Boomers, Millennials, or Generation X. Some people may know, at least approximately, the years that define their generations, such as for Boomers, the years 1946 to 1964. However, not many people probably know how all these generations are defined, what their makeup is, and what drives generational change. It is important, as the author of this volume, Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., points out, to understand various generations currently living in the USA, as “The era when you were born has a substantial influence on your behaviors, attitudes, values, and personality traits. In fact, when you were born has a larger effect on your personality and attitudes than the family who raised you does” (p. 2). Appreciating generational differences is important for understanding family relationships, the workplace, mental health, politics, economic policy, marketing, and public discourse. Twenge believes that “Studying the ebb and flow of generations is also a unique way to understand history” (p. 3).

In the first chapter of the book, “The How and Why of Generations,” Twenge postulated two broader questions: “What causes generational differences?” and “How can we discover the actual differences among generations?”

The classic theories of generational change focus on just one aspect of generational change, on major events (e.g., major wars). However, Twenge thinks that this view “misses the rest of cultural change—all the ways in which life today is so different from life twenty years ago, fifty years ago, or one hundred years ago” (p. 5). Twenge writes that the strongest candidate to consider as the root cause of cultural/generational changes is technology. “New technologies have reshaped social interaction and leisure time, value systems have shifted from rigid rules and strict social roles to individual expression and an embrace of diversity, and the milestones of adolescence and adulthood are now reached much later than they were seventy years ago” (p. 2). The examples of technologies that have changed our lives and make modern life easier, faster, more convenient, and more entertaining include television, home appliances, air conditioning, birth control, computers, internet news, and social media.

As Twenge further writes, technology does not always cause generational differences directly: there are intervening causes, such as, for instance, individualism and a slower life trajectory, with some contribution of major events. Twenge also notes that neither individualism nor collectivism is all good or all bad, and individualism and collectivism should not be conflated with political ideologies in considering generational changes. Interestingly, Twenge notes the work of two other authors who stated that “American history goes through somewhat predictable cycles of stability followed by conflicts” (p. 19) (e.g., they predicted that the late 2010s and early 2020s would be unsettled times!).

As far as the question on how to study generational differences, Twenge used 24 data sets, some of which go back to the 1940s (e.g., National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Millennial Cohort Study, American Time Use

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Survey, General Social Survey, Gallup poll, and others). As Twenge notes, these surveys cover sexuality, birth rates, political affiliation, income, time use, life goals, views about gender, drug and alcohol use, age at marriage, divorce, leadership roles, education, obesity, self-confidence, and desire for material things, and they also delve into mental health and happiness. Twenge warns us that even though we all belong to a generation, we should avoid stereotyping, and notes that not every member of a generation has to fit exactly and that generational cutoffs are arbitrary. Twenge argues against discarding the meanings of generations because they are getting shorter and argues that “generations are turning over faster because the pace of technological change has sped up” (p. 27).

Chapters 2 to 7 discuss the six generations currently populating the USA: Silents (born 1925–1945), Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1979), Millennials (1980–1994), Generation Z (*aka* iGen or Zoomers, 1995–2012), and the yet-unnamed generation born after 2013, which Twenge calls Polars (some call them Alphas). After the introductory text, each chapter includes a box with the generation’s population and a rough racial breakdown for the year 2021; the typical generations of their parents, children, and grandchildren; a list of the popular first names of the generation; and a list of some of the generation’s famous members from entertainment, politics, sports, and business. These facts are followed by a thorough discussion of various aspects of each generation (e.g., the “not-so-silent politics” of the Silent Generation [p. 59] and the “rise and fall of the latchkey kid” for Generation X [p. 161]), among them, importantly, each generation’s mental health.

Interestingly, Chapter 2, on “Silents,” contains a lot of surprising information. This generation “married young, had children, and built the stable, suburban lives associated with the 1950s and early 1960s” (p. 33). Yet this is a generation of pioneers in civil rights (its members include Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ruth Bader Ginsberg [p. 37]). “TV allowed people to see others’ perspectives and experiences” (p. 39). The Stonewall Inn raid (considered the first event of the LGBT rights movement) happened to this generation (pp. 46–48). Many Silent activists “were at the forefront of the twentieth century civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements” (p. 48). On the other hand, this group was the most marrying generation of the twentieth century. Interestingly, “Silents were the last generation to build true bipartisan coalitions” (p. 61) (in politics), which we have been really missing lately. Interestingly, fewer Silents have experienced mental distress, and Silents have a noticeably lower suicide rate than the Greatest generation before them or the early Boomers after them. They also coped better with the COVID pandemic; they were less likely to feel symptoms of depression and anxiety during the pandemic than younger generations.

Boomers (Chapter 3) have been the largest of the six generations and dominated politics (e.g., presidencies, Congress, governorships, university presidencies). They were not the leaders of the movements who changed civil and other rights; “Silents changed laws and rules, but Boomers changed hearts and minds” (p. 78) toward equality and other issues. Twenge reminds us about the way we look back at our lives in the Boomers chapter. We have a strong cluster of memories of our life between the ages of 10 and 30, known as the “reminiscence bump,” which means that “we remember the events of our adolescence and young adulthood more strongly than other times of our lives” (p. 78).

TV was not the only technology changing the lives of Boomers and their children. Other technologies that were ushered in during this generation include birth control (introduced in 1960), advances in medical care, labor-saving appliances, and computers. Very interesting is the discussion of Boomers’ mental health (pp. 127–138): this generation has more depression and mental distress and a higher level of drug use, and their happiness took a noticeable plunge. The suicide rate skyrocketed during the Boomer generation. The death rates for older Boomers went up, including more deaths of despair, especially drug overdoses. Boomers also have had unrealistic expectations compared to previous generations. “Jobs were no longer expected to just pay the bills but to be fulfilling, inspiring, and high-paying. Marriages were now expected to go beyond duty to satisfy the highest expectations for sexual pleasure as well as companionship” (p. 137).

Generation X, born 1965–1979 (Chapter 4), started to arrive at the scene in the early 1990s. “They wore a lot of black clothing. Youth protest was out, and cynicism was in” (p. 149). It is a generation hard to define; frequently, it is defined as not like being Boomers and not like being Millennials. It is the first generation to enter young adulthood in the age of the internet, the generation that “landed right in the middle of the influences of technology, individualism, and the slow-life strategy” (p. 151). Generation X married later and started to have children uncoupled from being married. This generation embraced individualism. The homicide rates went up; “young Gen X’ers were killing each other” (p. 187). Interestingly, members of this generation had more suicides as teens and a tougher adolescence but have more stable mental health as adults, just a little bit better than the mental health of Boomers. It is a generation more skeptical of authority (the generations born since 1960 are markedly less likely to trust other people).

Millennials (Chapter 5) have been born mostly to Boomer parents. They “were the most planned and wanted generation in American history to date. Raised in a time of optimism, they had high expectations for themselves” (p. 231). For them, “The individual self was not merely important; it was paramount. It was also, almost always, really awesome” (p.

231). This was also the generation where parents started to pressure teachers to give their children better grades. Students “seemed to want As for showing up to class or for simply completing assignments” (p. 247). Twenge considers Millennials entitled and discusses narcissism in connection to this generation, calling narcissism “individualism on steroids” (p. 250). Interestingly, Millennials have been doing economically better yet have felt poorer. They are also the most highly educated generation in US history. They have had fewer children and have been waiting longer to have them, probably due to their individualism and the slow lifestyle (delayed milestones). They have been less sexually active (this generation introduced terms such as *incels*, meaning “involuntary celibate” [p. 289] and *femcels*, a term for women who choose not to have sex [p. 290]). This is also a generation that is significantly less religious, as religion is not compatible with their individualism.

Millennials were happy as adolescents and are depressed as adults. They are dying at a considerably higher rate than Generation Xers were as prime-age adults. One of the culprits, according to Twenge, is “‘deaths of despair’ such as drug overdoses, suicide, and liver disease” (p. 329). This generation is also disappointed by adulthood; the country came apart during their time and seemingly everything became political around 2014, even before President Trump was elected. Twenge also speculates that “killing” marriage and religion was not a good idea for happiness (p. 339) and that technology changed the way people judge their lives and how they socialize (p. 340).

Chapter 6, on Generation Z, starts with a discussion of Generation Z gender fluidity, trends in sexual orientation, and having same-sex sexual partners. This chapter also points out that this generation is less sexually active than preceding generations. It is a generation of individuals who wait to take part in every activity associated with independence and adulthood. This is also a generation that is restricting or trying to restrict speech and a generation interested in physical and emotional safety, or even safety from discomfort. “Gen Z teens are markedly more lonely than previous generations at the same age” (p. 393) and are less satisfied with their lives and themselves. Twenge feels that the rise of new technologies such as social media seems to be the most likely culprit for the rise of teen depression, self-harm, and suicide. Gen Z teens spend considerable time on social media. “People who don’t sleep enough and who spend less time with others face-to-face are more likely to be depressed, and that’s what has happened *en masse* to teens and young adults” (p. 411). Gen Z is also less likely to be physically healthy.

Chapter 7, on “Polars (Born 2013–2029),” is a bit too speculative.

Chapter 8, the last chapter, called “The Future,” discusses issues such as the future of work (e.g., remote work [p. 464], safe spaces and speech [p. 466]) and the fact that Gen Z members often need more structure and directions at work. This finding may be important to note for those who are in charge of training this generation. However, interestingly, empathy is making a comeback, and Gen Z’ers find jobs where they can help others to be important. Wellness is more important to younger generations and for their mental health. Twenge also feels that the future is nonbinary (p. 474).

Chapter 8 further discusses the future of family in the context of continuously declining birth rates of the younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Z. One of the consequences is that the Social Security fund may go bankrupt in 2033 and pay only about 76% of currently expected benefits. Twenge thinks, though, that “if we can bring mental health back, we might also bring the birth rate back” (p. 484). Can we?

Twenge then discusses some measures we need to take in the future, such as regulation of technology, tamping down negativity, cutting down on misinformation, and protecting children, especially via making social media safer. Interesting also is a brief discussion of the future of race (did you know about requests for segregated college graduations? [p. 500]). Similarly interesting is the discussion of the future of religion; “groups based on political beliefs may be taking the place of religious groups” (p. 504).

Chapter 8 ends with discussion of the future of generations and the fact that rising individualism and the slow-life strategy have been growing with each generation, “delaying traditional milestones at every stage of the life cycle” (p. 513). Is this good or bad? I leave this to the reader.

This is a very interesting book, which is full of novel and entertaining information. The text is, despite the amount of information and some technical aspects, very readable. It could be useful to educators, as it will enlighten them about the generations they teach and hopefully help them to understand these generations better, which thus could lead to an improved approach to teaching and to improved mutual understanding among generations.

Declarations

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