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# Millennials – Themes in Current Literature

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## Introduction

Understanding people according to the aggregated characteristics of those born near them in time became popular with the emergence of the Baby Boom generation. Landmark research by Neil Howe and William Strauss established what they have seen as a repeating pattern of generational types. Many authors have built on their work, and some of the most popular current literature on generational understanding comes from Howe and Strauss themselves, in their recent books, *Millennials Rising* and *Millennials Go To College*.

By no means, however, do Howe and Strauss represent the only, or even the most significant voice on the generation of people that make up today's students in elementary, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions. They have been variously labeled the Net Generation, iGeneration, Generation Y, Generation Me, and of course, Howe and Strauss's own Millennial Generation. And opinions about this generation vary as widely as the labels.

## Defining the Generation

For the sake of simplicity, this article will refer to them as Millennials, but regardless of the name, the most common definition of this generation is those born from approximately 1980 through 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Sutherland & Thompson, 2001). The most significant variation on this definition comes from Twenge, who includes all those born in the 1970's as well (Twenge, 2006). By and large, the Millennials are considered the children of the Baby Boomers. They have grown up in an era marked by the widespread use of birth-control and abortion to limit the number of unwanted children, resulting in a very pro-child culture in which "wanted" children were much more the norm (Sutherland & Thompson, 2001). They have lived in an era of relative peace, knowing little of worldwide conflict until the recent emergence of global terrorism. They have lived in an era of relative prosperity, in which economic boom periods have been high, and downturns have been slight (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

## Themes In The Literature

There are a number of general themes that can be found in recent literature regarding the Millennial generation. Many of these themes, though originating from different sources and perspectives, are complimentary, and even those in conflict with one another, find they have common foundations.

### Special

The most common and most significant theme found in literature about the Millennial Generation is that they have been told since birth that they are each unique and special, and that they embrace this specialness wholeheartedly. While different authors interpret this generational characteristic in different ways, there is no doubt that this is the defining trait of the cohort, and forms the foundation for many of the other characteristics, strengths and weaknesses that authors ascribe to this group.

Howe and Strauss emphasize the emergence of the pro-child culture among Baby Boomer adults as the catalyst for this characteristic, and Twenge supports this idea, to a degree. With the emergence of widespread use of birth control, and the growing availability of abortion through the 60's and 70's, Americans entered an era in which fewer and fewer 'unwanted' babies were born (Sutherland & Thompson, 2001). Parents became parents because they wanted children (or increasingly a single child), not because childbearing was foisted upon them. This era saw cultural adoption of the pro-child ethic in movies, books and the ubiquitous 'Baby On Board' bumper

stickers. Institutions joined the bandwagon as well with the adoption of official self-esteem curricula in schools and churches across the nation (Twenge, 2006). And families, even as they grew more diverse in nature and style seemed to merge in their approach to including children more than ever in family decisions. Where researchers and authors seem to disagree on Millennials is in the effect of their ‘specialness’.

Howe and Strauss tend to describe neutral to very positive outcomes for this generation. They describe Millennials as sheltered, and expecting safety and support from society and its structures. They believe that Millennials have translated their special status into confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed both personally and in their goals for society. They will accomplish these goals as team-oriented, community-minded citizens who believe in, and tend to follow societal conventions. That is, they tend to be rule followers because they believe in the rules that brought them through their happy childhoods.

Twenge, on the other hand, perceives less optimistic outcomes for the Millennials, which she calls Generation Me. She expresses concern that the overt emphasis on individual ‘specialness’, particularly as carried out through both formal and informal self-esteem training in the home, at school and at church, has resulted in a generation of people for whom the individual is of ultimate importance. Twenge’s research, in contrast to Howe and Strauss, has revealed a generation that is more individualistic, and more self-oriented than any that have gone before. As a result, this generation is less likely to care about others’ opinions, and more likely to flaunt societal conventions.

### **How Do You Feel?**

Twenge clashes again with Howe and Strauss when describing how Millennials feel about themselves. Howe and Strauss concluded that their special childhood provided the basis for confident, achieving Millennial teens and young adults. Though they admit that the Millennials feel pressure to succeed, and to solve societal problems that their parents were unable to solve, they contend that this generation believes that they will be both financially and socially successful. Howe and Strauss also cite achievements in high school academics and extra-curricular activities as evidence that these Millennials may indeed live up to their confident expectations.

Twenge, however, cites research that seems to indicate that the Millennials are leaving their exuberant confidence behind as they leave childhood. The focus on individual specialness, especially when separate from accomplishment (i.e. you are special for who you are, not what you do), has bred a generation of individuals who tend to isolate themselves from deep relationships, as each pursues his or her personal needs and aspirations. The encouragement that so many young Millennials heard in childhood, that you can be/do anything, as long as you try hard enough, want it bad enough, and follow your dreams has created unrealistically high expectations of themselves, and the adult society they are entering. This isolation, and unrealistic expectations are combining in young adult Millennials and producing high levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness among Millennials today.

### **Relating To The Other Generations**

Whether in educational settings, work, church or the family, Millennials must interact every day with members of the generations that preceded them. As they move through their teens and twenties, into adulthood, the nature of the Millennials’ relationships with their elders is another theme found in recent literature.

Sutherland and Thompson describe how the changing makeup of the nuclear family has, in many cases, led to a dynamic in which children are included in family discussions and decisions to a greater degree than previous generations. Howe and Strauss echo this sentiment in their discussion of the parent-child co-purchase. As this dynamic blends with the message to special importance that Millennial kids have heard all their lives, the result is often a young adult who views his or her relationship with older adults as a peer-to-peer relationship.

This equality approach has implications in a variety of areas. Culturally, Millennials believe that their individual opinions and styles are just as valid as anyone else’s. Consequently, enthusiastic self-expression flourishes under the perspective that everyone’s opinion of how they look or act is equally valid. Twenge cites the explosion of tattoos and piercings as an example of this trend. In the workplace, the idea of paying dues, and working up the corporate ladder is foreign. Millennials expect their views to be valued from the beginning, and advancement to

be rapid (Raines, 2002; Twenge, 2006). In education, Millennials are more than willing to challenge professors on everything from opinions and conclusions to the very facts themselves, with no conception that the instructor's perspective is any more valid than their own (Twenge, 2006). Generally speaking, what Millennials seem to seek from other generations is acceptance as equals (Aviles, Phillips, Rosenblatt & Vargas, 2005; Windham, 2005).

Millennials engage the ideas of diversity and equality in ways that are similar to the ways in which they relate to other generations. Both Twenge and Howe and Strauss agree that Millennials are more accepting of diversity, and view people who are different from each other (whether race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) as equals. Howe and Strauss believe they hold these views due to their tendency toward community, and team-orientation. Twenge feels that since they are less likely to believe in moral absolutes, they are tolerant and accepting of diversity in all its forms.

### **KAGOY**

Sutherland and Thompson use the term KAGOY, referring to the idea that Kids Are Growing Up Younger. Howe and Strauss refer to this in their discussion of the 'busy-ness' of Millennial children, and many articles on Millennials use of technology refer to it as well. This generation has had more access to more information as children than any other. At the same time, their inclusion in family decisions, changes in media programming (especially television), and changes in youth activities (such as organized sports and camps) have given them access at younger ages to experiences that had previously been reserved for older children or adults (Sutherland & Thompson, 2001). This process of growing up younger has contributed to their view of older people as peers, and their willingness to share their beliefs and perspectives with adults from a perspective of equality.

Sutherland and Thompson also cite research that seems to indicate that Millennials are actually experiencing earlier physical maturity, which may contribute to the Millennials changing attitudes toward sex. Earlier exposure to images and ideas about sex, and encouragement from adults to pursue their personal desires has led to changing sexual mores among Millennials. They take sex less seriously, and are more likely to experiment with sex earlier, approve of premarital sex and be more accepting of casual sex, outside of any relationship context (Twenge, 2006).

### **Technology**

While more of a cultural reality than generational characteristic, technology has so affected and defined the Millennial generation that it regularly emerges as a theme in literature on the subject. While all generations alive today have experienced the development of technology, and adapted to the changes it has brought to society, the Millennials are the only ones who did not live through the *emergence* of this technology as adults. The Millennials, on the other hand, have and will continue to come of age in a society in which personal computers and the internet with its related technologies are a given – part of the backdrop of everyday life (Sutherland & Thompson, 2001). Millennials are amazed by this technology no more than previous generations are amazed by a radio.

Prensky (2001a) describes the situation with the analogy that Millennials are natives in a society that is dominated by the technology we have today, whereas previous generations are 'digital immigrants'. There are significant implications for the differences in the ways that the natives and the immigrants think about the land they live in. What previous generations might describe as distractibility, Millennials describe as multitasking; effectively using multiple technologies to work on multiple tasks to complete multiple goals at one time. Millennials have been described as having short attention spans, yet they can spend extended time in sharply focused activity when playing high-tech video games (Prensky, 2001b).

And just as we often hear about American natives' frustrations with immigrants' understanding of the language, culture and rules of our society, so are the digital natives often frustrated with digital immigrants' understanding and use of technology. In the classroom, students are exasperated by instructors who either fail to use technology, or fail to use it effectively (Prensky, 2006; Oblinger & Hawkins, 2005).

## Conclusion

It is tempting, but ultimately ineffective to try to predict individual behavior by understanding the trends within a group. There is no doubt that the reader can cite many examples of individuals who clearly don't fit with the descriptive trends found in literature about the Millennial generation. However, when trends within a group are clearly established in research and literature, it is wise to allow an understanding of those trends to inform policy and decision-making in an organization.

The clearest truism with regard to the Millennial generation is that they have been told throughout their childhood that they are each unique and special, and that as they become adults, it is clear that they have believed the message. For some, this belief will likely translate into ambitious goals, and great achievement. For others, it is likely that this belief will translate into unrealistic goals, and crushing disappointment. The Higher Education community must be prepared to both encourage success, and provide safety nets for failure as students learn to work through both of these experiences as adults. We must also be prepared to walk with students through the process of understanding the difference between a gathering of unique and special individuals, each of which subscribes to their own ultimate importance, and the development of a community in which shared goals and the needs of others take precedence.

As we work with students on these issues, we must be prepared to embrace the technology culture of the digital natives. Millennials use existing and emerging technologies with ease and comfort, and will be frustrated with members of the older generations if we cannot keep up. Embracing the use of technology in our interactions with Millennials is key to maintaining credibility.

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