

## Text 5

### MILLENNIALS – Themes In The Literature.

#### I. Introduction

Authors Neil Howe and William Strauss are widely credited with coining the term 'Millennial Generation', a reference to children graduating from secondary school in the year 2000. Since their landmark research on generational types, many authors have built on Howe and Strauss' work. This article will identify a number of general themes found in recent literature regarding the Millennial generation. Many of these themes, though originating from different sources and perspectives, are complementary, and even those in conflict with one another find they have common foundations.

#### II. \_\_

This article will refer to Millennials as 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 1970s as well (Twenge, 2006).

By and large, the Millennials are considered the children of the Baby Boomers. They have grown up in a child-centred society, adored from infancy by their parents and other adults (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 also lived in an era of relative prosperity, in which economic boom periods have been high, and downturns have been slight (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

#### III. \_

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.

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 60s and 70s, Americans entered an era in which fewer and fewer 'unwanted' babies were born (Sutherland & Thompson, 2001). Parents became parents because they wanted children, 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' car bumper stickers. Schools across the nation joined the bandwagon as well with the adoption of official self-esteem curricula (Twenge, 2006).

Where researchers and authors seem to disagree on Millennials is in the effect of their 'specialness'. Howe and Strauss believe that Millennials have translated their special status into an ability to contribute to society and its structures. They are community-minded citizens who believe in, and tend to follow, societal conventions 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' has resulted in a generation 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 society's conventions.

#### IV. \_\_

Twenge clashes again with Howe and Strauss when describing Millennials' belief in their ability to succeed. Though Howe and Strauss admit that the Millennials feel pressure to succeed, they contend that this confident, achieving 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 encouragement that so many young Millennials heard, that you can be or do anything, as long as you try hard enough and follow your dreams, has created unrealistically high expectations of themselves, producing high levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness among Millennials today.

#### V. \_\_

Whether in school, work, or at home, 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 structure 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. As this dynamic blends with the message of 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 emphasis on equality has implications in a variety of areas. Culturally, Millennials believe that their identity is just as valid as anyone else's. Consequently, enthusiastic self-expression has flourished, and 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). In education, Millennials are more than willing to challenge professors on everything from opinions 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 be seeking from other generations is acceptance as equals (Windham, 2005)

#### VI. \_\_

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 its emergence as adults.

Prensky (2001) describes the situation with the analogy that Millennials are natives in a society that is dominated by modern technology, 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 might have once been described as distractibility, is now considered multi-tasking: the practice of doing multiple things simultaneously. To describe Millennials as having short attention spans denies the evidence that they can spend extended time in sharply focused activity when playing high-tech video games (Prensky, 2001).

#### VII. Conclusion

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. Millennials need to be encouraged to succeed and provided safety nets for failure as they learn to work through both of these experiences as adults.