

Every Generation of People Is Different In Important Ways

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Parents in today's world are constantly complaining about not being able to communicate with their children, and such grudges from children are never uncommon. In bridging the gap for the parent-child relationship we should never lose sight of several fundamental factors at play.

One of the factors accountable for the difference will be the way we were and are brought up and educated. Born into the postwar fifties, my parents belonged to a generation in which life was difficult and resources were lacking. How to make a decent living for their survival would be the most pressing problem and the education they received answered to such practical needs—mechanics, accounting, bookkeeping, farming, etc. Access to higher education was extremely selective and its relatively high tuition fees could also intimidate those who were financially inferior. On the contrary, we are brought up in an age of modernity when the practical issues of personal survival are longer an issue (or a less urgent one than it used to be). Unlike our parents' generation, ours enjoys a greater extent of freedom from want and fear, given much more room for self-realization and pursuit. Instead of going to the farm or factory, we go to cram schools and piano classes and learn whatever arts which interest us. Universities and graduate schools, once an exclusionary, unattainable luxury for the privileged few, now become a shared educational experience that people of our generation have in common. Also noteworthy is the fact that in our generation, education means more than indoctrination: it entails getting in touch with the world and recognizing diversity. We are encouraged to discuss and express ourselves, participate actively in teamwork, and think critically of every aspect of life—which was almost impossible in our parents' generation back in the fifties, when the pedagogical method tended to be authoritative rather than dialogic. Learning could be an alienating experience in my parents' generation. All that they could count on was the printed text, whereas we have multimedia facilities and Internet which connect one individual with another.

These differences in educational upbringings seem to undermine an even more radical factor, that is, the material culture and the social-economic structure within which each individual is cultivated and implicated. Perhaps this can be illustrated in the scene where my parent and I work together to clean our house. When it comes to house cleaning, there is always a moment of tension—a debate over, say, a vase, a cup, or even a pencil. My parents cannot understand why I can throw away a T-shirt without incurring any sense of guilt, which I take as natural since it is out of fashion and there is no reason for keeping it. And every year this scenario always ends this way: whatever I dispose of my parents stealthily relocate to their “proper” place, and year after year that T-shirt lies

still in my wardrobe, untouched. Apparently this anecdote brings up two different ways of perceiving the objects in relation to ourselves, further pointing to an underlying politics of economy functioning respectively in two generations. My generation is one of material culture, commodity, and mass consumption fostered by the capitalist rhetoric, whereas my parents, even in the twenty-first century, still cannot completely do away with that nostalgic, pre-capitalist man-object relationship that emphasizes commitment and loyalty. My father never dumps his shoes unless they are worn out; I, on the other hand, never stop trying to get a new pair even if I already have thirty.

Constancy and change, singularity and plurality, monologue and dialogue, texts and hypertexts, the local and the cosmopolitan—these pairs all mark the striking differences between two generations of people. More significantly these differences represent a striking paradigm shift in how we perceive the world and how the world is changing us, and they are, to be sure, the most apt expressions for the social, political and economic field each individual is inextricably woven into.