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Counseling Across Generations: Bridging the Baby Boomer, Generations X, and Generations Y Gap

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As counselors, we accept and respect the possibility of working with diverse clients. Recently, a new element of diversity has surfaced: The advent of generational differences is upon us. It is critical that we acknowledge these differences to best serve the variety of clients we assist. This essay will compare and contrast characteristics of the three most recent generations – Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. Typical challenges and conflicts for each generation are discussed and interventions and strategies for bridging generational gaps in therapeutic and consultative settings are explored.

A Comparative Analysis

Table 1 defines the five distinct generations that have been identified in the past century. To accommodate the needs of each generation, we must acknowledge the historical events and societal trends that occurred as each generation was advancing through its early developmental stages.

Table 1: Generations Defined

Name	Birth Years	Age in 2007
<i>GI Generation</i>	1901-1924	83 and above
<i>Silent Generation (Traditionalist)</i>	1925-1945	62-82
<i>Baby Boomers</i>	1946-1964	43-61
<i>Generation X</i>	1965-1980	27-42
<i>Generation Y</i>	1981-2002	26 and younger

We are all a product of the generation before us; our behaviors and attitudes are strongly influenced by our parents. Accordingly, we must also consider the events and trends that occurred during the lives of our parents to appreciate the driving force of their parenting style. For the Baby Boomers, this means considering the late-GI Generation and the Silent Generation. Largely due to wartime challenges, members of these two generations felt a strong sense of responsibility, duty, honor, and faith (Brokaw, 1998). The maturation process of these groups accelerated as a result of wartime activities and the subsequent economy. This hardworking group generated the world's largest generation — the Baby Boomers.

Baby Boomers grew up during a very optimistic post-World War II economy and planned to take full advantage of it. They were determined to avoid the hardships and to have it better than their parents. With a television now in every home, critical events including the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Women's Rights movement, and the OPEC oil embargo were brought into their living rooms. Families reaped the benefits of a solid economy including increased job availability, a boom in production of consumer goods, the promise of good education, and the chance for a relatively affluent, opportunity-rich world. As the largest generation in history, Baby Boomers were competitive. Considered the "Me Generation," they felt they were able to get whatever they wanted. They identified strongly by what they did at work and valued long workweeks and upward mobility, albeit at the expense of marital and family harmony.

Not surprisingly, the children of the Baby Boomers, Generation X, became extremely resourceful, self-sufficient, ambitious, and independent individuals. Generation X children were born during one of the most blatantly anti-child phases in history. The U.S. divorce rate tripled during the birth years of Generation X, resulting in a new era of single parent homes, stepfamilies, and split custody. Abortion rates were at their highest, along with dual income families; parenting habits were permissive and children were often left alone to care for themselves (Codrington & Grant-Marshall, 2004). At a young age, they observed Watergate, Vietnam, the Challenger explosion, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the shootings at Kent State.

Members of this generation finish college, marry, have children, and enter the job market later than their parents. With a down turn in the economy and a shift toward globalization, Generation X is the first to experience significant geographic dispersion in the family. They are global thinkers who value diversity and work-life balance (Tulgan, 2000). They are skeptical about the permanence of institutional and personal relationships as they observed significant role models and institutions called into question for crimes and dishonest behavior. They are determined to be active in their children's lives.

Where Generation X respects and values diversity, Generation Y lives diversity (Martin & Tulgan, 2001). They are the most ethnically diverse generation in the U. S. They are accustomed to different family structures; one in four was raised by single parents and three in four have working mothers. This generation has been overwhelmingly exposed to violence including the Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine High School shootings, and 9/11 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). TV talk shows and reality TV demonstrate violence, anger, and shouting as a means to problem resolution. They are realistic about the challenges of modern life for modern kids and as a result are physically and emotionally close to their parents. In addition, they are endlessly connected to others through the Internet and cell phones. They are optimistic and tenacious: empowered to take personal action when things go wrong.

Each generation has had its own set of historical events and significant cultural trends that have influenced how individual members within a generation think, feel, and act. Despite the myriad differences, one common thread remains: values. Deal (2007) confirms that the Baby Boomers and Generation X share a common set of critical values. Family ranks number one as the top value for these two groups, with integrity, love, spirituality, and happiness close behind. Focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and large group interactions suggest family is also a top priority for Generation Y. Huntley (2006) redefines the extended family of Generation Y to include close friends. Balance between work and family, a value that Baby Boomers and Generation Xers include in their top ten list, is typically expressed as also very important by members of Generation Y.

Challenges Across the Generational Divide

One step in reducing the gap between generations is to better understand the challenges that each group encounters. For example, Baby Boomers will present work and retirement related concerns. Work issues may include real or perceived discrimination, as well as a sense of disrespect from those in younger generations. Although it is not uncommon for more seasoned workers to feel threatened by younger employees, Generation Y is creating an added threat in that they are the first generation to enter the workforce with such a strong sense of entitlement (Gravett & Throckmorton, 2007). They are opposed to working many years before job advancement if they are seemingly qualified. This creates tension for members of both generations. Baby Boomers are more sensitive to this issue as they are simultaneously questioning their own knowledge, skills, and abilities in this every-changing global economy. This is new territory for someone in their late-forties to early sixties. Raised in a time of extreme prosperity and corporate loyalty; job security was never an issue. Baby Boomers were used to setting goals and achieving what they wanted. Although competitive as a generation, they are surprised to find that they now have to compete with the younger generation. Baby Boomers like to feel valued and respected – their experience appreciated. The hurried pace of the current workplace does not support this need.

Alternately, Baby Boomers have rising concerns about their retirement, which they may not have expected during the early stages of their careers. This generation is the first to expect such longevity after retirement. Traditionally individuals retired at the age of 65. With life spans exceeding 80 years old, this extends the length of retirement substantially. Financial considerations become prominent. Will I have enough money to live? Many lost significant savings during the stock market bust of the late 90's. In addition, social security income will likely be dramatically reduced, if not totally eliminated. Another common concern relates to generativity during the retirement years. The term Baby Boomer has become synonymous with work-a-holic. It is frightening to wonder what will

replace this all-encompassing daily grind. How will I feel whole without my work? What will I do with my time? Where will I derive satisfaction? We may expect a generation experiencing an identity crisis.

Finally, the Baby Boomers may be experiencing guilt related to relationships in their lives. How have my children been impacted by my lack of availability? Did I spend enough time doing good for the community? Was I so self-focused to achieve my dreams, a good income, and material goods for my family that I sacrificed spending time on activities with less tangible rewards? A recent survey of 3000 Boomers supports this retrospective evaluation (Harris, 2007). This generation will also be the first to experience eldercare. As their parents are beginning to live longer, questions about who will take care of them and who will cover the expense begin to surface.

We recognize members of Generation X by their independent, determined nature. Born to parents who were working hard “to give their children everything,” they were the most unsupervised generation in history. Attending latchkey programs and coming home to empty houses to fend for themselves left this generation very capable. They became faithful to themselves and are skeptical of institutions and relationships that have let them down. The parents of Generation X convinced their children that they could have and do anything. Their resulting self-reliant and confident nature is often perceived as selfish and narcissistic. This generation will likely raise issues of resentment and abandonment after having been left alone. They may also present with depressive symptoms resulting from falling short of their parents’ and their own lofty and perfection-based goals (Kenny & Sirin, 2006).

Generation X are risk takers who are determined to create a balance between work and family. Making up for lost time they missed with their own parents, they pressure themselves to be overly-involved with their own children. The children of Generation X are involved in every play group, school activity, and community event. The advent of Baby Einstein® and learning a second language before age one is extending the expectation of perfection onto the offspring of Generation X – creating unrealistic expectations for everyone involved.

Lastly, Generation X will more fully experience what Baby Boomers will only touch the surface of as it relates to caring for their own parents. Generation X may experience increased stress as the result of being a caregiver sandwiched between taking care of both their parents and their own children. There is added pressure to these activities based on the geographically-sprawling family structure.

The challenges and concerns of Generation Y fall into two primary categories: Work and relationships. Well-meaning parents from late-Baby Boomers and Generation X have encouraged this group to achieve and to get what they want. Along the way, members of Generation Y have been endlessly rewarded for often trivial efforts. All sports teams are “winners,” advancement from all grades (e.g., Kindergarten, 1st grade, 6th grade, etc.), is recognized with a graduation. We have become a society that celebrates mediocrity. Little effort is grandly awarded. In so doing, we have set up an unrealistic scenario of adult life. Members of Generation Y graduate with a sense of entitlement... a feeling that they deserve largely as they have been constantly rewarded for often small, trivial successes.

Levine (2005) coined the term “work-life unreadiness” to characterize this position of young adults. In our efforts to encourage, reward, and create positive self-esteem, we have encouraged ambitious career expectations that are unrealistic for the reality of life after graduation. Many members of Generation Y fail to launch successfully into the world of work. They may feel frustrated that they are not paid as highly as they feel they are entitled. They feel discouraged that they are forced to “put in their dues” before climbing the corporate ladder. Some find they are simply ill-prepared technically and socially for the world of work. Having been used to being well-rewarded for often little effort, many members of Generation Y move from job to job seeking this immediate satisfaction.

Generation Y is also experiencing challenges with relationships. There are many communication challenges in the workplace across the generations. Most relate to perceived disrespect between the parties. Relationship problems extend beyond the workplace, as well. These include boundary and enmeshment issues. Although this generation has a strong bond with its parents, the

hovering “helicopter” parent who is unable to say goodbye to their child when dropping them off at college demonstrates inappropriate attachment. This reinforces the young adult’s need to “run back home when the going gets tough” at school or at work. The advent of technology has enhanced issues of boundaries. Individuals are able to share intimate details about themselves through computers and cell phones. An otherwise inhibited young adult can become quite open on MySpace, YouTube, or Facebook. There may be a sense of belonging through this electronic media. Yet Ramirez and Zhang (2007) suggest once these individuals meet face to face, the relationship may weaken.

This generation has grown up in a frightening world where individuals have been asked to give up many of their own civil liberties for the sake of “international security.” Willingness to share personal information is a way of life and now extends to all relationships. Williams (2007) questions “if this is just carelessness about personal boundaries or a perfect mirror of the firmly inculcated surveillances by which their entire lives have been constrained” (p. 36). Ultimately, these work and relationship issues will present as depression and anxiety and their related symptoms of poor health and possible suicidal thoughts (Twenge, 2006; Verhaagen, 2005).

Strategies for Counseling and Consulting Across Generations

As counselors and consultants, it is critical that we consider the similarities and differences between generations. We need to respect that each generation is the product of the generation that has come before, as well as a result of the historical and societal events and trends that took place during their developmental years. We are most effective facilitating the helping process from our client’s worldview.

The CACREP (2001) standards for gerontological counseling provide a good foundation for working with Baby Boomers. These promote an approach that encourages wellness and empowerment. This is a generation of achievers; we must respect their desire for continued employment and activity beyond traditionally defined

retirement. Our role is to help this group set new short- and long-term goals for life after age 65, as they relate to financial, social, and employment activities. Maples and Abney (2006) include the need to enhance the dignity and worth of this generation and to attend to dependence and independence issues. Finally, the Baby Boomers would benefit from stress management strategies to address significant life change, eldercare issues, and increasing health concerns.

Stress and time management strategies will also be useful to Generation X, who feels sandwiched in between raising their own children and caring for older parents. A component of this is to work on setting realistic goals for themselves, their families, and their relationships. This is the first generation to experience the severe decline in two-parent families and it is evident in their own failing relationships. With lack of good role models, this group needs assistance building and sustaining healthy partnerships. Finally, this group would benefit by taking a closer look at their parenting styles. Parenting is not about being perfect, or creating a perfect life for your child. These unrealistic expectations place burden on both the parent and the child.

Reality-based therapy and career counseling may be the most useful for Generation Y. The counselor must present a more realistic picture of the world-of-work, help clients identify what career may be the best fit, and help build strategies, including goal setting, for finding and maintaining satisfying employment. Another significant area of work relates to establishing appropriate boundaries in relationships with friends, families, and coworkers. A challenge with this group is that they may become discontent and easily bored with the counseling environment. Raised with constant change and high speed technology, where everything is seemingly at the touch of a finger, keeping this group focused and interested may be difficult.

The Final Analysis

As with any other element of diversity, we must be sure to keep our own perspective, values and potential biases in check. We

bridge the generation gap by showing respect, offering support and communicating with each other. Our goal is to model and encourage this with and for our clients.

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