

THE 1970'S GENERATION THAT AMERICAN CULTURE FAILED

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THE NAMELESS GENERATION

. The 1970's generation is not recognized by a distinguishing label such as roaring, determined, patriotic, silent, or tumultuous, like preceding generations in the United States. There have been some attempts to label it. Tom Wolfe was the first journalist with books like Looking Out for Number 1, How to be Your Own Best Friend, and Your Erroneous Zones. He calls this the "Me" Generation. At a more scholarly level, Sociologist Edwin Schur, in The Awareness Trap argues that this generation of Americans have become self-absorbed, withdrawing into themselves in an ahistorical, apolitical, commercialized search for self-knowledge. The social historian, Christopher Lasch, in Haven in a Heartless World, and the psychoanalysts, Ernest Wolf and Heinz Kohun, in The Restoration of Self say that a new narcissism has emerged to become the predominant psychological pattern in modern Western culture.

METHOD AND OBJECTIVE

. This analysis is a qualitative synopsis of data from 20 in-depth interviews and 60 analytical essays by members of the 70's generation. The present thesis is contrary to those of the populists and the sociologist, Schur, and is to some degree complementary to the thinking of Lasch and the members of the Chicago School of Psychoanalysis.

. Thesis: This is the generation which culture has failed. Almost by default, members of this generation have moved back to the only base on which they can depend: themselves. Stripped of traditional support systems, people of this generation feel very much alone. Their suicide rate reflects this social isolation. Most '70's

people choose to survive, but to do so, they have become tough, competitive, gritty, and self-reliant.

CHARACTERISTICS

. Analysis of the essays and interviews does not reveal findings at odds with surveys reported during the past decade by Lou Harris, George Gallup, the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center's Monitoring the Future Project, and the American Council on Education. Members in this sample have low trust in all institutions and they express high desire for personal gain.

. Young Americans of the 1970's generation are career-minded, money oriented, and competitive. They are apolitical, and not given to social action, though they will help others directly through charity drives. They vary in religious beliefs, most of which are individualist and personal. Though some come from happy families, many do not. They accept shifting sex roles and sexual liberation. They are uncertain about maintaining permanent relationships, having children, and developing intimate bonds. They work fairly hard in schools and colleges as they need good grades to get diplomas to enter careers. Fun and leisure are important. "Partying down" is a valued antidote to the fatigue of hard goal oriented work.

. At a personal level, they define themselves as distrustful of institutions and accepting of individuals. They see themselves as private, pessimistic, pragmatic, realistic, alone, isolated, cynical, hedonistic, alienated and insecure. Their most frequent description of their generation is individualistic. The 1970's generation also has an alarmingly high suicide rate. Rates calculated by the National Center for Health Statistics demonstrate that the suicide rate for the 15-24 age group has increased over 300% between 1954 and 1976. The suicide rate in this

age group increased from 4.2 to more than 12 per 100,000.

SHAPING FORCES

. Three types of forces interacted with members of the 1970's generation to shape their unique personal identity: 1) their families and others who socialized them; 2) the '60's generation which preceded them; and 3) the national events of the 1970's, particularly, those which provided the basis for their sense of distrust in societal institutions.

Patterns of socialization:

. Parents of most 1970's people are members of the patriotic '40's or the silent '50's generation. Many were not sympathetic to the events of the 1960's. Growing up during the 1960's, most members of the '70's generation came into social and political consciousness in the latter years of the decade. They knew directly the anger and violence of the late '60's without understanding the earlier years of largely nonviolent civil disobedience which produced that anger. Most of their parents and teachers recoiled at the violence in the larger society, discouraged active social involvement, and hoped for restored social order. These events and the resultant socialization had their impact on the members of the '70's generation, but their direct assessment of the success of the generation which preceded them impressed them much more.

VOICES OF THE '70'S GENERATION

About the '60's generation:

"We of the '70's have learned from those of the '60's that rather than fight the system, you're better off to join it, play the game, and get all you can, because protesting won't get you anything but unemployed."

"The '60's generation chose to try and change this. In the end, they sold out to it. This left the '70's generation with few, if any,

idealistic dreams. After the failure of the '60's generation to reach any of their ideals, it made visible the futility of trying to improve the world. With the more idealistic aspect of life that youth generally holds stripped away from us, the '70's generation seeks something we can hold on to. We have chosen the tangible, practical, material things of this life. We seek the pleasures that material things allow us to enjoy."

"Experience in a turbulent and unmanageable world has led us to look for happiness, success, and meaning on a smaller scale. An 'everyone-for-one's-self' attitude has replaced the frustrated ideal of brotherhood. The '60's dreams of large-scale political changes to benefit all humanity did not come true. The '70's generation looks at politics realistically -- even cynically -- and asks for little more than to be left alone to pursue its private dreams. The religion of the '60's was love for all the world, but the dream remained only a dream. The '70's people look to religion mainly for personal comfort and meaning."

. One cannot underestimate the impact which the failure of the preceding generation's idealism had on this generation. Coupled with their personal life experiences as they interact with the larger social institutions, this helps explain some of their contradictory characteristics.

Questions by the '70's generation.

Social events and social realities of the 1970's have convinced members of this generation that they are young people in a society whose institutions they cannot trust. These are some questions they ask:

"Who can expect political integrity from a government which permitted the offenses of Watergate and Koreagate to occur?"

"Who can trust a simultaneously

inflated and recessed economic system to fulfill its function of providing jobs for the people of a society?"

"What good is an educational system which does not even teach people basic writing and thinking skills?"

"How long does one feel faithful to religious institutions which speak mainly to issues of another era?"

"How steadfast is the family which no longer provides long term stability, warmth, shared concern, and intimacy?"

Perceiving this society's institutions as worthy neither of loyalty nor repudiation, the '70's generation has moved back into itself. According to some of the '70's generation:

"If you don't know where society's headed, or what you can do about it, you concentrate on yourself. You move ahead, and try to become successful. Rather than becoming totally despairing over the state of society, you try to be happy and to get what you want and need from life. You don't worry too much about anyone else."

"The generation of the '70's is not easily described or defined. This is revealing of the one description that does seem to fit. It is a generation of private people - of individuals who find their identity more on their own, than as members of any large group. In many ways, it is a generation that has retreated and drawn back from larger societal issues and problems, seeking quieter, more personal lives. It is cautious and somewhat aloof, and pragmatic with a realism that can border on cynicism. It tends to be narrow in its outlook and vision."

"The '70's generation grew up on Vietnam. I was born in 1955, and until the war ended, could not

remember a time when it was not going on. Along with Vietnam there was the civil rights struggle, and then the riots and the Black militancy. There was the social awakening to the problem of pollution and the crises of the environment. As we grew older and our understanding deepened, so did society's understanding of the world's problems and limitations. With the food crisis and the energy crisis, the world became a place of continuing crisis."

"The generation before us was passionately engaged in changing the world. To us, it was too overwhelming, and we drew back in bewilderment and confusion. We could not identify with the naive and basically optimistic idealism of the 1960's. It did not seem effective. The problems were only worsening. It was all too much to take in, and too big to fight. Instead, we sought security and some firm ground to stand on. We became politically more conservative, taking refuge in what seemed established and safe. Instead of reaching out to the world, we sought community in smaller, more personal groups. Religious sects stressing authority and strict discipline flourished. College fraternities and sororities regained their lost popularity. Even the military and police forces lost their stigma, and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) re-emerged as an acceptable campus involvement. Establishment was no longer a dirty word, but a goal to be earnestly sought."

"Watergate was not without its influence, but did not seem to have come as too big a surprise to '70's people. Instead, it merely confirmed the suspicion that the world in general is not a terribly trustworthy place. People are out for themselves, and if you don't look out for your own interests, no one else will."

"There is nothing militant about

this generation. Black people, experiencing initial gains, are working more as individuals to gain political and economic power within the system. Even the women's movement seems to gain its most ardent supporters from older generations. Movements in general find sparse followings, a reflection of the tendency to keep one's life private and manageable. The '70's generation has learned to close its eyes in self-defense, to a world that makes too many demands and presents too many problems."

DISCUSSION

. The central clues to this generation's identity are found in its high degree of individualism and its high suicide rate. The theory which provides the basis for interpreting such clues is Emile Durkheim's Suicide. Durkheim argued that suicide may be considered 'normal' because it occurs in all societies, often at rather stable rates for long periods of time. But Durkheim believed that sudden increases in the suicide rates of certain groups, social categories, or total societies are 'abnormal' and can be taken as an index of disintegrating forces at work in the social structure. Such an unusual increase in the suicide rate of 15 - 24 year olds has occurred in this society in the past twenty years, and it can be taken as an indicator of problems in the social structure.

. Traditionally, institutions which shape the social structure have helped to provide individuals with a purpose for existence and the basis for personal fulfillment. Economies provide jobs. Educational institutions provide learning experiences which become a grounding for life. Religions help people find meaning in their lives. Politics should provide trusted and able leadership. Families provide genuine and lasting personal acceptance and support. Traditionally, when people felt that social institutions were not fulfill-

ing their missions, they have organized and collectively have instituted reform.

. Young people now find themselves in a culture where they see no institution fulfilling its traditional role. The economy may not provide them with jobs. Educational institutions do not provide learning experiences which prepare them to lead full, productive lives. Religious institutions do not help them in questions of being. Politicians are deeply distrusted. Even families, friendships and the love relationship are seen as capricious, without permanence and stability. With its view of the '60's generation, the new generation has no hope that collective action on their part would produce any meaningful social reform.

. Members of the '70's generation do not see the society providing norms to guide them in pursuit of their goals, nor, at a more personal level, do they feel integrated into groups which give them a sense of belonging and a sense of social cohesion. Many of this generation feel alienated and alone. These factors contribute to suicide for some of this generation, and they deeply affect the others. They are a generation of tough, self-reliant, competitive individuals who seek to provide for and please themselves, as the only entity on which they can count. Trusting no larger institutions and few other individuals, they have become the generation that American culture failed.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an abridgment of a much longer paper which is available from the author.