How Gen Z Is Different, According to Social Scientists

Our research findings suggest that college-age members of Generation Z know they are confronting a future of big challenges—whether they can find jobs or own homes, how they will handle climate change, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and pandemic illnesses.

[Roberta Katz](#)Apr 2, 2019

Two years ago, over dinner, three colleagues and I told anecdotes about our college-age students and advisees, all members of Generation Z. One anecdote featured the young woman who told me that she and her friends

hated their humanities classes. Writing papers for history, literature, or philosophy classes, she explained, required too much self-reflection, for which she would have to sit quietly alone with her thoughts "for at least 15 minutes." She and her peers much preferred classes that encouraged group problem-solving, like the code-writing courses offered by the computer science department. The tidiness of the answers in a code-writing exercise, arrived at in collaboration with others, seemed to her not just more satisfying but more educationally relevant.

Another anecdote concerned a group of students, around 80 in number, who decided to protest the lack of diversity in faculty hiring at the university. The students came together through a collaboratively drafted Google Doc, permitting often-anonymous edits until no one had anything more to add. Someone came up with a name for the group, which all agreed to adopt, but no one stepped up to be the leader: Naming a leader would have violated the students' shared commitment to the absolute equality of all. As a result, the university's administration found itself having to address the same demands over and over again, as different students showed up for meetings. No one student would speak for any other. This was a group in name and number, but a series of individuals in action.

As we told each other these anecdotes, we realized we felt like journalists reporting from a foreign culture. The attitudes and behaviors we were describing seemed very odd to us: Wasn't college *supposed* to be about self-reflection, and weren't groups *supposed* to have leaders? These suppositions had been widely shared when we were all in college but are not necessarily shared by the students of today. We asked ourselves whether this was evidence of a broader generational gulf that might explain why we felt so confused, just as visitors to other countries are often confused by local customs and values.

Given our disciplinary backgrounds in sociology, cultural history, linguistics, and anthropology, our conversation soon turned to questions of social science. What if these behaviors and attitudes were adaptations to significant technological and social changes? What had these young people experienced as they were growing up in the topsy-turvy years following the introduction of the Internet in 1995 and in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008–09? How did those experiences during their formative years affect their expectations about how their lives would unfold?

These questions turned into the "iGen Project," a multidisciplinary, cross-national study that would ask college-age students to tell us more about themselves. To date, our research has led to in-depth interviews with over 100 college students in or near the universities where our team members work: Lancaster University in northern England, and Stanford University and Foothill Community College, both in Silicon Valley. We will add voices of members of Generation Z who are not enrolled in college through a broad-based survey that we will carry out in the coming months. (It is interesting to note that the Pew Research Center reports that the 18- to 20-year-old members of Generation Z are more likely than Millennials to have finished high school and to enroll in college.)

In the interviews, we asked the students to tell us how they spend their time, what they value, and how they generally see the world around them. While our research is not yet complete, we have already learned a lot, including that the stories we shared with each other at that dinner two years ago were hardly unique. Our interviewees have told us they place considerable emphasis on finding their own identities and respecting the identities of others. They defend diversity and equality and want to correct injustices based on identity. They turn to peers and the Internet for advice and community, and to their parents for comfort and support. They are pragmatic problem solvers, relying on a range of digital devices, apps, and

networks for speed and efficiency. They zero in on what is "relevant" in order to sort through vast quantities of information or multiple options. And they like to work in collaboration with others, with or without a leader. If someone does step up to lead, they expect that person to guide or influence but not to direct, so that all members of the group retain their personal agency.

In contrast to many (maybe most) of their elders, members of Generation Z are fully at home in cyberspace, moving seamlessly between the "real" world and the one online. After all, from birth, the environment they experienced—the so-called "water they learned to swim in"—was one of ubiquitous screens, global connectivity, "smart" technologies, and software tools to digitalize nearly every type of human endeavor. How could they not be different from those of us who grew up when making a phone call to a foreign country from a home or office phone was a significant, or unthinkable, undertaking?

In part because members of Generation Z are still so young, relatively little was written about them until recently, when observers began to recognize that they are different even from the Millennials who immediately preceded them. Some writers have been critical of Generation Z, calling them "snowflakes" who are unprepared for adult responsibilities, though others are now starting to speak up on their behalf. Our research findings, while still incomplete, suggest that college-age members of Generation Z know they are confronting a future of big challenges—not just whether they can find jobs or own homes, but how they will handle climate change, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, 3-D-printed guns, and pandemic illnesses —and, depending on the person, are afraid, resigned, or energized.

The upcoming articles in this Pacific Standard series will highlight many aspects of life among Generation Z. We will hear from members of the

generation, their parents, grandparents, doctors, and teachers, and people who, like our team, are doing research to learn more about them. My three research colleagues, Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw, and Linda Woodhead, are grateful to all the authors and very much look forward to reading your comments—please share your reactions to what you read and send us your own thoughts about, or experiences with, Generation Z.

Our research team would like to express our gratitude to Pacific Standard for publishing this series of articles; to Stanford University's Center for Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) and its director, Margaret Levi, for hosting [The iGen Project](#), to the Knight Foundation for generously funding our work, and to Glenn Kramon, a former editor at the New York Times *and current lecturer at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, for helping edit many of the articles.*

(Photo: Pacific Standard) [Understanding Gen Z](#)*, a collaboration between Pacific Standard and Stanford's [Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences](#), investigates the historical context and social science research that helps explain the next generation. Join our [newsletter](#) to see new stories, and let us know your thoughts on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).*

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