

TEXAS

Recreation & Park Society

M A G A Z I N E

Parks and Recreation and the American Culture: Understanding the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials

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Reaching back to the beginning of the American experience, sociologists have worked to identify, describe and understand the different generations that have made up the American fabric. The purpose of this effort has been to help us better understand the American populace. Demographers have discovered and categorized as many as thirty different generational periods. We are most familiar with the four generations that currently make up our social experience, the Silent Generation (those individuals born between 1925 and 1945), Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (those born from 1961 to 1981) and Millennials (those born from 1977 through 2003). Social observers do debate the exact dates and terms used to describe these generations, so it is not uncommon to find variations to this American phenomenon.

As parks and recreation professionals strive for creativity, responsiveness and sensitivity to their stewardships, understanding these four generations is helpful and perhaps essential.

Silent Generation

This term was first coined in 1951 by *Time* magazine to describe those people born from 1925 to 1945. The image as the silent generation was that of hard workers who did not seek public recognition and respected authority and left leadership to those elected or appointed. Other terms that have been used to label this generation include the post war generation, GI generation, the seekers and Tom Brokaw's "the greatest generation".

This generation was influenced by the Great Depression, World War II, the automobile and the GI Bill. They experienced economic success during the post crisis era of the 1950s and have been noted as the "company man" or the "family man." They are retired and generally live in affluence and memories of success.

This generation, partly because of their age, is more easily recognized in the media. Members of this generation include: Johnny Carson (1925), William F. Buckley (1925), Cesar Chavez (1927), Martin Luther King (1929), Sandra Day O'Connor (1930), Mickey Mantle (1931), Carl Sagan (1934), Tom Brokaw (1940), and Muhammad Ali (1942).

Their children are the baby boomer generation and are called such because of the delay in the silent generation marrying and having children until the ending of World War II and the men of that generation grouped away in the military.

Baby Boomers

This term was popularized by the book *Boomer Generation* and describes those individuals born between 1946 and 1964. Other terms coined for this group include the Cold War Generation, Echo Boomers and Shadow Boomers (referring specifically to those born between 1958 and 1963). The baby boomer icon was an attempt by sociologists to identify the rather large number of people born post World War II and hence a boom of births.

This generation was influenced by a free world economy, hippies, the Kennedy assassination, the moon landing, Vietnam War, Civil Rights movements, counter culture, the military draft and television. They have been noted as idealist, those needing relevance, self focused and concerned with social leadership. Mid-life evaluation and career change highlight the group with the rejection of micromanagement philosophy, being overly educated with general affluence in which their generational mark is still being made.

This generation might be recognized by Bill Clinton (1946) and George Bush (1946), Bill Gates (1955) and Michael Jackson (1958). The baby boomers' children are the X generation, so coined with the X representing a less defined and perhaps even nameless generation. The baby boomer generation was influenced significantly by the silent generation by either a rejection of the earlier generation's beliefs or by readopting them with new and different perspectives.

Generation X

This term was first used in 1964 in *Women's Own Magazine* but popularized by the Douglas Coupland book *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. The phrase attempts to describe those individuals born between 1961 and 1981 and the X refers to a generation that is nameless, less defined, perhaps lost or even alienated from the previous generation. Other terms used to capture this group have been the "whatever" generation or baby busters (specifically referring to those born between 1958 and 1968).

This generation has been influenced by an all volunteer military, MTV, the collapse of the Soviet Union, fall of the Berlin Wall, and by the Challenger explosion (with many of the generation watching the episode live on television in their school classroom). They have been introduced to HIV and a world that expects a college degree.

They have generally delayed marriage and having a family and believe that anything is possible if enough money is made available. They understand flex time and flex roles, women in leadership in the workforce, heavy focus on priority setting and accept the leadership roles of the

baby boomer generation. Individuals from this generation include George Clooney (1961), George Stephanopoulos (1961) and Steve Young (1961). Their children are the millennials.

Millennials

This generation is represented by those individuals born between 1977 through 2003 or generally toward and over the year 2000. This term was popularized by the magazine *Ad Age* and attempts to describe a generation that is still unfolding. Other terms used to identify this group include Generation Y, the Internet generation and Boomerang group.

This generation has been influenced by the internet, personal computers, I-Pods, cell phones, and DVD's. They have also experienced September 11, the war on terrorism and school violence. They understand "instant" access such as instant messaging, phone calls, music downloads, Googling and real time. They have been taught multi-tasking, multiculturalism, internationalism and wealth diversification across the globe. Individuals from this generation include Orlando Bloom (1977) and Shawn Fanning (1980). Their identity is still emerging but shared values and worldviews appear as major themes.

Implications

What does this information mean to the field of parks and recreation? Note that people from these four generations might all be in the workplace at the same time, sitting on advisory boards and commissions, elected to positions within both local and national politics and make up the voting public. We design parks and recreation facilities and develop program experiences and offerings for these diverse groups.

The values of these generations have been shaped by their experiences of both formative years as well as world events. Their thinking is based in part on observing parents, the creation of generation definitions, significant defining events of their life and what one chooses to keep or give away as a process of living.

The Silent Generation value sacrifice, dedication, conformity, order, hard work, respect for authority and formality. The Baby Boomer Generation value optimism, health and wellness, personal growth, personal involvement and personal gratification. Generation X value self reliance, risk taking, diversity, pragmatism, global thinking and skepticism. Millennials value civic duty, achievement, diversity and immediacy.

It is important to understand people, their perspectives and what might be the foundation for their thinking. It is possible that this understanding is found in their generational pattern.

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