

# Five generations of people side by side

by Sylvie Lapointe – December 13, 2009

I have always been fascinated by sociology, the study of human societies.

[Diane Pacom](#), a sociology professor at the University of Ottawa gave a wonderful presentation on the generational gap between today's youth and the older generations a few weeks ago.

Did you know that there are presently five distinct generations living side by side in Canada?

There are two million folks in Canada who are from the **1920's generation** (1920-1929) who are now in their eighties. The "Roaring Twenties" or the "Jazz Age" was a period of prosperity after the first World War and it was also a period of changing morals.

This period of our history is also called the "Lost Generation". Many good, young men went to war and died, or returned home either physically or mentally wounded (for most, both), and their faith in the moral guideposts that had earlier given them hope, were no longer valid...they were "Lost." "Lost" also describes the general feeling of discontinuity associated with a break with traditions. Everything seemed to be feasible through modern technology.



New technologies, especially automobiles, moving pictures and proliferated 'modernity' to a large part of the population. There was no television yet and even less computers or Internet...

There are 2.5 million Canadians who were born in the period of the [Great Depression](#), the 1930-1939 generation. "What was once a land of opportunities became a land of desperation" to quote Bettye Sutton. Money was scarce. People were focused on survival instead of advancement. Authors have compared the Great Depression to the economic crisis we have experienced in the last year. Diane Pacom says that the impact of the depression on the 1930's youth was quite different. Today's youth define themselves by brands. You are ridiculed if you have an ordinary MP3 as opposed to an iPod. You are not cool if you wear department store brand running shoes rather than the latest Nikes. You are a "loser" if you wear your sister's hand me downs rather than the Lululemon sweatshirt or the Aeropostale t-shirts. So in a sense, the loss of income in this period of economic turn-down not only affected individual's capacity to attend to basic needs but it also undermined youth's sense of identity and self-worth. The 1930's youth fared better on that front.

The generation of the Second World War (1940-46) are also called the "**Silent Generation**". The "Pre-Boomers" as they are sometimes called, entered adulthood in the 1950s and benefited from ample job opportunities, rapid promotion and easy prosperity.

[The Baby Boomers](#), people born between 1947 and 1964, are 9 million in Canada today. The Baby Boomers are the first generation of "youth" in humanity. Before them, a person went from being a child to a young adult in the span of a couple of years. Today you are considered "young" if you are between 14 years of age to 34 years of age. The boomers created our culture's fixation with youth. Today, there is a young way of dressing, a young way of talking and writing (e.g. rap, MSN and texting), a young way to playing (e.g. Ipods, Playstations, Youtube, etc...) thanks to the marketing genius of Baby Boomers.

The boomers have deconstructed our world. The boomers declared that marriage, church, family, politics,... were OUT. But they have not replaced these institutions with any other traditions.

The [Generation X](#) is the last cohort of the Baby Boomers, born between 1961 and 1980. A National Post article published on February 27, 2007 declares that Gen X will change the work culture. The author, Ray Williams, describes the Gen X, as people who grew up with pet rocks, platform shoes and watched *The Simpsons*. *"They question authority, seek bigger meaning in life and work, are technologically savvy, live in the present, are skeptical, see career as a key to happiness, are open to multi-careers, consider challenge and variety as being more important than job security and constantly aim to achieve work-life balance."* Diane Pacom points out that today's politics is attracting Generation X people like [Obama](#), [Stephen Harper](#) and [Jean Charest](#). They are pushing for a return to strong values and traditions.

After the Generation X, the [Generation Y](#) is considered to be the echo to the Baby Boomers. These youth between 14 to 29 years of age number almost 7 million in Canada. They are the "I" generation as opposed to the "me" generation. Diane Pacom explains that a "me" usually implies a "you" but for the Generation Y people there is no "you", so therefore they are just focused on the "I".

According to Mme Pacom, they are the "enfants rois" (the royal children) - to whom everything is owed and everything is given (often out of guilt from parents who don't know how to be worthy of the title of "good parent"). This generation of children has been the most wanted. Every milestone was marked with celebrations and praise. They may carry a sense of entitlement about them and have an expectation of frequent positive feedback.

Teachers have coined a term to describe those children's parents: the helicopter parents. Like helicopters, parents of Generation Y kids hover closely overhead, rarely out of reach, whether their children need them or not. The Generation Y children are

sheltered. They grew up in a time of increasing safety measures (car seats, baby on board signs, school lockdowns). They were rarely left unsupervised. They were sheltered from having to take care of their own conflicts as parents advocated on their behalf, and “spared” them from unpleasant experiences

The Generation Y children are “trophy kids” and they feel pressure to excel. It is interesting to note that the Generation Y children have been identified in the school system as “gifted” in record numbers. In a typical week, those children juggle school, homework, band practice, soccer team / hockey team practice and singing lessons. For every “royal child” explains Diane Pacom, there are three excluded children. The children that have been diagnosed (and medicated) in record numbers in the last 15 to 20 years as having ADHD, anxiety, Asperger Syndrome or learning difficulties. Those kids who just don't belong in a world where you need to be “super” at something just to be noticed. Ordinary just doesn't cut it anymore.

The [Millennial Generation](#) are children born since 1996. These children were born in a high tech, high speed society. The Millennial children are more intuitive and more creative than older generations were at that age. They take to computers like a fish takes to water and have a natural understanding of technology in general that can border on the uncanny. They seem to have an understanding of the spiritual beyond their years and a matter-of-fact attitude toward the paranormal are often attributed to these youngsters. Millennials are on track to become the best-educated and best-behaved adults in the nation's history. More comfortable with their parents' values than any other generation in living memory, Millennials support convention – the idea that social rules can help. Diane Pacom says that these children are the most promising generation.

I believe that every generation has something precious to contribute to the next generation and important lessons to learn from the previous generation. As a parent of a Generation Y child and a Millennial child, I have to ask myself how can I give my daughters the space and the confidence to become who they are meant to be? How can I instill in my daughters a respect for older generations? How can I encourage them to be curious and appreciative for the wisdom older people have acquired in their lifetime?

I think that like many things in life you start small. A couple of weeks ago I asked my father who will turn 80 in March, if he would take me and my 13 year old daughter to his father's land in Quebec to cut down a small Christmas tree. On the way there, three generations of people, my daughter (the Millennial child), myself (the Gen X'er) and my father (the Great Depression generation) were having a lively conversation about Christmas traditions and memories.

"What do you want for Christmas?" my father asks my daughter. "I want a tablet" she says. "You want a chocolate bar? (tablette de chocolat)" my father replies with surprise in his voice. "No, I want a computerized tablet on which I can draw my Manga characters and save them directly onto the hard drive so that I can color them in

electronically and use them in video clips." she explains. "Ahhh. I understand. I didn't know that kind of thing existed" my father says with a bit of wonder in his voice. You see, even though my dad is from the Great Depression era, he fell in love with computers in his fifties and is very knowledgeable about them. Computers are one of his greatest pastimes. He makes the most amazing three dimensional birthday cards using graphics that he designs on the computer. He photo shops our pictures and attaches our heads onto characters that depict us in situations that illustrate a momentous event in our life. His creative interpretations of our lives always make us smile and tug at our hearts. In some ways, my father has more in common with my daughter when it comes to computers than I do. Instead of being a communication obstacle between generations, the computer bridges the communication gap in my family. Isn't that wonderful?

What are some of the bridges that you can help build between the generations in your family or in your workplace?

Check out this video clip on YouTube about growing old. Very touching.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz\\_TK8HEne4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz_TK8HEne4)