

## Every Every Every Generation Has Been the Me Me Me Generation

Elspeth Reeve May 9, 2013

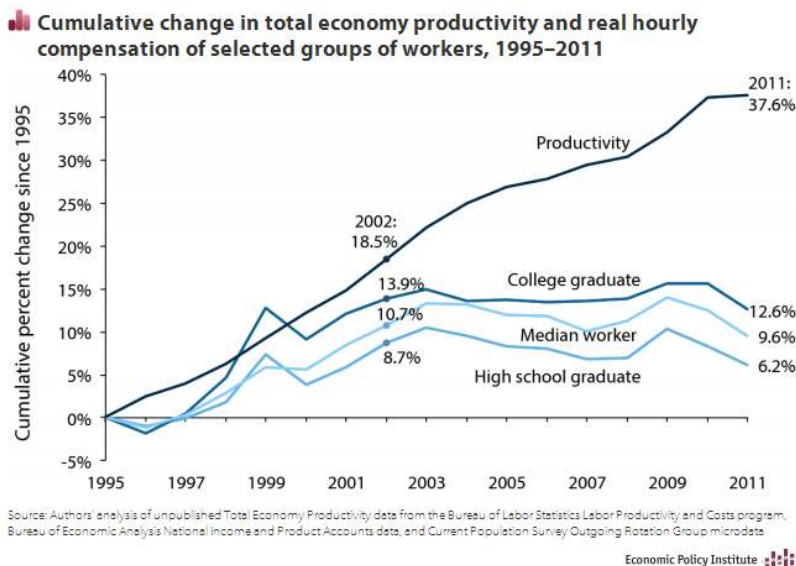


Millennials are the "ME ME ME GENERATION," writes Joel Stein for the cover of *Time* magazine, which is apparently a marked departure from the Baby Boomers, who were the plain old "Me Generation" (one me, no caps) and who created the "Me Decade" in the 1970s, and who coined the phrase, "But enough about me... what do you think about me?" in the 1980s when they were raising the next narcissists, Generation X. Sometimes you get the sense that these magazines' cultural writers have very little experience with the entire American culture, and prefer to make their grand analyses based on what people they know in the gentrified parts of cities like New York and Los Angeles were talking about at brunch last weekend. The type of young person that magazine writers come across most frequently are magazine interns. Because the media industry is high-status, but, at least early on, very low pay in a very expensive city, it attracts a lot of rich kids. Entitled, arrogant, spoiled, preening — those are the alleged signature traits of Millennials, as diagnosed by countless magazine writers. Those traits

curiously align perfectly with the signature traits of a rich kid. Have you seen your intern on Rich Kids of Instagram? If so, he or she is probably not the best guide to crafting the composite personality of a generation that fought three wars for you.

To Stein's credit, he has some sociological research to make his case — he brings "the cold, hard data." However, much of his data can be countered by other data. For example, Stein writes:

Their development is stunted: more people ages 18 to 29 live with their parents than with a spouse, according to the 2012 Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults. In 1992, the nonprofit Families and Work Institute reported that 80 percent of people under 23 wanted to one day have a job with greater responsibility; 10 years later, only 60 percent did.



Yes, people are marrying later and the economy sucks. The unemployment rate would be 6.5 percent, a full point lower, if Washington — you might know them as "old people" — hadn't implemented spending cuts in 2011, *The New York Times* reports. As for laziness, the chart at right shows that as worker productivity has soared, wages have remained stagnant. We're all working hard, we're just not getting paid.

But here is Stein's most important bit of data:

The incidence of narcissistic personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their 20s as for the generation that's now 65 or older, according to the National Institutes of Health; 58 percent more college students scored higher on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982.

About that. There is another paper over at NIH.gov that argues that that is kind of maybe completely wrong. In a 2010 paper

published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* and titled "It Is Developmental Me, Not Generation Me," Brent W. Roberts, Grant Edmonds, and Emily Grijalva write:

First, we show that when new data on narcissism are folded into preexisting meta-analytic data, there is no increase in narcissism in college students over the last few decades. Second, we show, in contrast, that age changes in narcissism are both replicable and comparatively large in comparison to generational changes in narcissism.

Basically, it's not that people born after 1980 are narcissists, it's that young people are narcissists, and they get over themselves as they get older. It's like doing a study of toddlers and declaring those born since 2010 are *Generation Sociopath: Kids These Days Will Pull Your Hair, Pee On Walls, Throw Full Bowls of Cereal Without Even Thinking of the Consequences*. Further, they write:

In turn, when older people are told that younger people are getting increasingly narcissistic, they may be prone to agree because they confuse the claim for generational change with the fact that younger people are simply more narcissistic than they are. The confusion leads to an increased likelihood that older individuals will agree with the Generation Me argument despite its lack of empirical support.

Hahaha, you doddering old confused fools! *Generation Abe Simpson!*

For some visual evidence of this phenomenon, here is a century or so of culture writers declaring the youth to be self-obsessed little monsters.

**The Atlantic,**  
**September**  
**1907:** In the  
cover story, "Why  
American  
Marriages Fail,"  
Anna A. Rogers  
warned, "The  
rock upon which  
most of the  
flower-bedecked  
marriage barges

THE  
**ATLANTIC MONTHLY**  
*SEPTEMBER, 1907*  
**WHY AMERICAN MARRIAGES FAIL**  
BY ANNA A. ROGERS

1

THE STAGE OF THE KNIFE

"We surgeons of the law do desperate cures, Sir!"

THAT a large percentage of marriages achieve very little beyond a bare working compromise with happiness is not to be seriously denied. Nor is it to be doubted that there are more matrimonial catastrophes to-day than there were a generation ago. In fact, more recent dis-

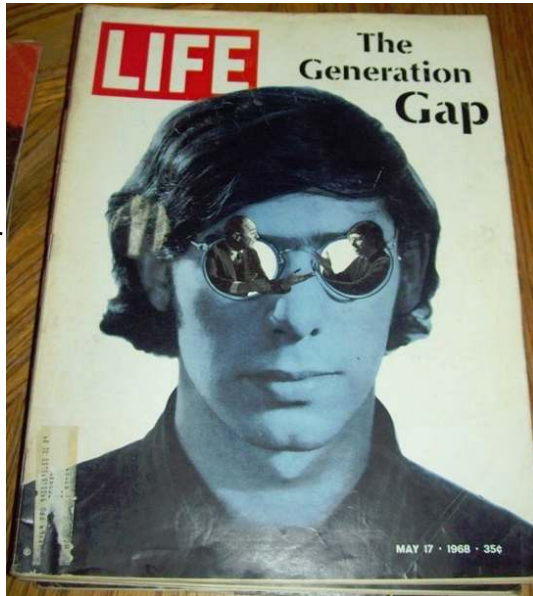
diseases in the world of to-day than there were in Babylon, but that the wider and more intelligent recognition of disease and the modern differentiation in diagnosis lead to a false impression; that the real difference lies in the fact that a physician's work is now done in the open; that his discoveries belong to the morning paper; and that our modern life teems with specialists, hospitals, and an ever-enlarging *materia medica*. Medical books and magazines and lectures are more and more accessible to the general public.

go to pieces is the latter-day cult of individualism; the worship of the brazen calf of the Self."

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**Life, May 17, 1968:** "The Generation Gap."

An uncle and his 20-year-old nephew detail their experiences living together one summer. It goes how you'd expect, except that Uncle Ernie tried weed for the first time. Like, one time,



Ernie met his nephew's friends at a diner:

Then somebody said, "Would you take the Dow account?"

"You bet," I said.

"Even though they make napalm?" he asked. ...

Even as I said it I knew the phrase *to make a living* could have absolutely no meaning to these children of the affluent society.

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**New**

**York, August 23,**

**1976: "The 'Me'**

**Decade and the**

**Third Great**

**Awakening."** Tom

Wolfe opened this

story with a

sobering account

of some kind of

Los Angeles thing

in which a couple

hundred people

got together and

pressed "the reset

button" on

something that

really bothered them, and for one lady, that thing was

hemorrhoids. "In her experience lies the explanation of

certain grand puzzles of the 1970s, a period that will

come to be known as the Me Decade."



## New York '76 Politics Fail to Disturb Campus Calm and Cynicism

BY JON NORDHEIMER

RENT, Ohio — Harold Regala was for the average guy. I don't think I can guess. The Democratic Party's rally at Kent State University the other night was the last political meeting on campus since 1972.

On a campus with more than 30,000 students, more than 100,000 students in the region, fewer than 50 students had turned out in a show of support for Jimmy Carter. And even those who came seemed nervous and wary, hesitant to answer their time.

"It's not like '72, when we had more than 400 students voluntarily meeting the night of the 'George McGovern' rally," says Regala, a local Democratic worker, said last night. "But it's far better than 1974 when we had to pay 150 students to make phone calls in the campaign for governor when we couldn't get students volunteers."

The fact that anyone could be pleased by such an event seemed to indicate of how low political activity has fallen on Kent State campus, where National Guard troops killed four students after opening fire on an anti-Vietnam War protest demonstration in 1970.

But all across the nation this fall, not just Kent State, both national and state elections for first student body, President, in this generation of college students, is not only elective in "elections," but also and R.G.T.C. are back in vogue.

The current Presidential campaign, for the most part, has a curious, detached presence on campuses where four years ago thousands of students cheered the volunteer work of the Nixon-McGovern race. On many every campus, with the possible exception of schools in Georgia, campaign organizers report finding little student excitement for either Mr. Carter or President Ford, the Republican incumbent.

Applauding on America

Some observers have compared today's students to the 1960s. But the issues of the current election are different.



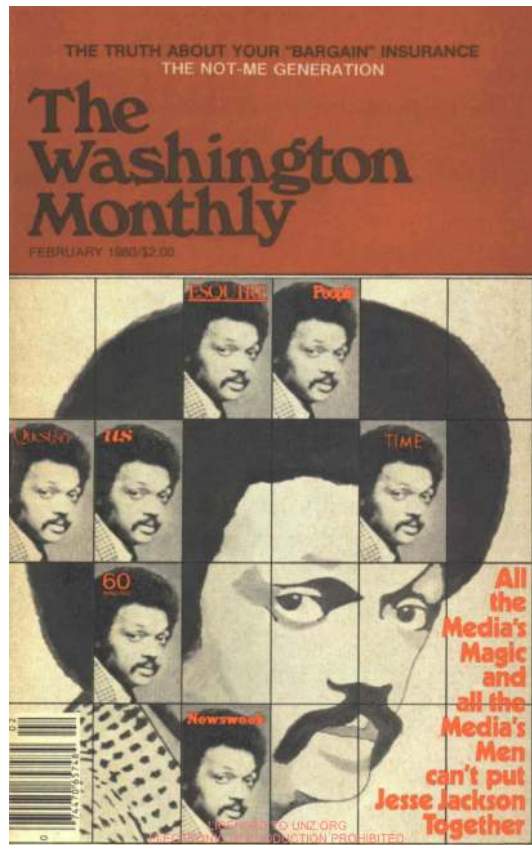
A student at UCLA was more interested in an afternoon nap last week than in a speech by Gary Familian, a Democratic House candidate.

**Times, October 17, 1976: "76 Politics Fail to Disturb Campus Calm and Cynicism."** The youth were too busy navel gazing to care about politics. "The Now Generation has become the Me Generation," the *Times* said. A photo of a napping youth read, "A student at UCLA was more interested in an afternoon nap last week than a speech by Gary Familian, a Democratic House candidate."



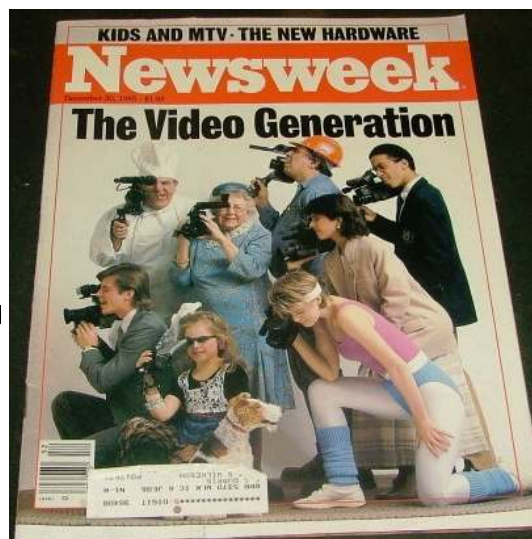
***The Washington Monthly*, February**

**1980:** Greg Easterbrook wrote about how young people were having trouble coupling in "Fear of Success" (subhed: "If you want me, she said, I'll be hiding under the bed"). And while he said we can't blame *everything* on self-obsession, he did acknowledge a major social trend. "It is tempting to see willing disappointment in romance as a symptom of self-obsession: since no lover can rival in grandeur the upper-case Self, what is to be gained from giving one's affection? But me-mania is a fashion, not a level of spirit." This was plugged on the cover as "THE NOT-ME GENERATION."



***Newsweek*, December 30, 1985:**

"The Video Generation." There they are, those preening narcissists who have to document every banal moment with their cutting-edge communications technology.



**Time, July 16,**

**1990: Cover:**

"Twentysomething."

Inside: "Proceeding With Caution." Yes, like every generation, Gen X was a bunch of screwups: "They have trouble making decisions. They would rather hike in the Himalayas than climb a corporate ladder..."

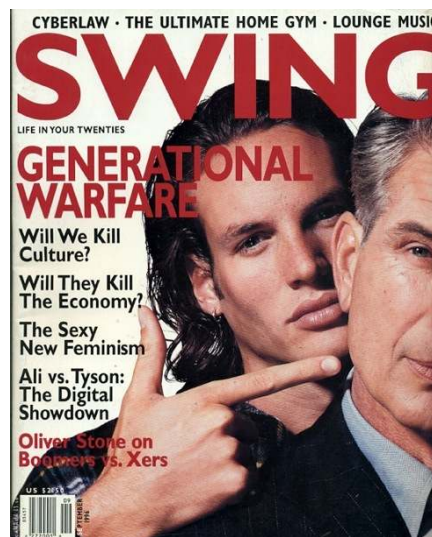
They crave entertainment, but their attention span is as short as one zap of a TV dial... They

postpone marriage because they dread divorce." However, in 1990, *Time* ranked them as not as terrible as their parents on at least one score: "By and large, the 18-to-29 group scornfully rejects the habits and values of the baby boomers, viewing that group as self-centered, fickle and impractical." That scorn does not lead to being much different. "Like Madonna in her hit song 'Vogue,' this generation knows how to 'strike a pose.'"



**Swing, September 1996:**

"Generational Warfare." Look out old man, there's a well-groomed nihilist in his sexual prime coming your way.



**Time, August 6, 2007:**

"It's All About Me."

China's

"twentysomethings"

had boldly gone

where every other

generation had gone

before.



Want to add to this story? Let us know in comments or send an email to the author at [ereeve@theatlantic.com](mailto:ereeve@theatlantic.com). You can share ideas for stories on the Open Wire.

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