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The Millennial generation: Howe and Strauss disputed

Holly Alexander Agati
College of William & Mary - School of Education

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THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION: HOWE AND STRAUSS DISPUTED

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by Holly Alexander Agati
November 2011
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Abstract

THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION: HOWE AND STRAUSS DISPUTED

Researchers have attempted to untangle the complexity of a generation through four primary effects—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—based on personal and societal attributes. The Millennial generation, born 1982-2000, has received considerable attention through the media, in educational institutions, and in the workplace. The seven persona characterization of the Millennials of Howe and Strauss (1991, 2000) has been extensively cited, yet not been widely scrutinized. Higher education personnel, in particular, have utilized Howe and Strauss’ theory to explain changes observed with the current college student population.

This case study sought to discover the relationship and interrelationship between the four-generation effects and to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the Millennial generation. This study explored the perceptions of twenty-eight, traditionally aged college students from two mid-Atlantic universities. The findings reveal that generations are more complex than the four-generation effects, and the Millennial portrait has been understated. The personal attributes, specifically related to the family, serve as the foundation for the values, attitudes, and beliefs the participants develop about the societal attributes. Generations have been examined only from the perspective of heterogeneity between and homogeneity within generations. This viewpoint is limited, and the converse is important to consider. Generations appear to develop as a kaleidoscope rather than in distinct groupings.

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EDUCATION POLICY, PLANNING AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY IN VIRGINIA
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Contemporary American society is enamored with the concept of a generation to explain differences between individuals. Although theorists from a variety of disciplines and fields have focused on linear time interval ranges, cohort status, or life stage definitions primarily to contextualize our understanding generations (Cavalli, 2004; DiMartini, 1985; Dunham, 1998; Guardo, 1982; Kertzer, 1982; Mannheim, 1928/1996; Strauss & Howe, 1991), misconceptions about generations permeate our understanding precisely because of the many definitions relating to generations. Further, generational thinking has been applied in a variety of settings. In the business sector, the generational concept has been used as a marketing strategy (Bonfiglio, 2008; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001). In the workforce, generational categorizations have been employed to describe differences between older and younger colleagues as well as for recruiting and retaining employees (Lancaster & Stallman, 2002; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). On college campuses, generations have been used to delineate cohorts and changes in the mood or attitudes of students (Coomes & Debard, 2004; Guard, 1982; Levine, 1980; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Strauss & Howe, 2003). The newest generation cohort, the Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000), has received considerable attention in America and higher education even though Howe and Strauss’ (2000) depiction may be distorted.

Generation Theory

The generational concept has been pondered for many centuries and has typically been analyzed from an historical or sociological perspective, which appears to no longer be sufficient due to an increasingly complex world (Jaeger, 1985; Kertzer, 1983; Strauss &
Howe, 1991). Examining generations from merely one perspective is limiting and paints an incomplete picture. Furthermore, theorists assume a common understanding of how to define a generation, (Cavalli, 2004; DiMartini, 1985; Dunham, 1998; Guardo, 1982; Kertzer, 1982; Mannheim, 1928/1996; Strauss & Howe, 1991), although each definition of generations engenders different parameters and thus meanings. Generations have been defined by kinship, linear time interval, cohort, and life-stages each contributing its own definition to the dialogue. Kinship generation definitions have focused on familial relationships. Linear time interval ranges have been understood as a generation being defined over a period of time and consisting of parents and their children. Generations as a cohort are more complex, but typically focus on a period of time or a common experience such as attending college. Last, life-stage generational definitions combine cohort, time interval, and age of the generation, such as the sandwich generation who are caring for both their own children and their aging parents. Even though the components of the definitions are different, the implication throughout the literature is a common understanding and perception of a generation, while the reality conveys interpretations that vary greatly. This study investigated a new conceptualization of a generation based on personal and societal attributes as related to the four combined generation effects of time interval, cohort, period, and attitude.

Most previous and current generation scholars have been bound by a time interval model of a generation (Mannheim, 1928/1996; Strauss & Howe, 1991). An inherent challenge with the time interval formulation is the difficulty in determining when one generation ends and the next begins. The Millennial generation, according to Strauss and Howe (1991), began with infants born in 1982. Are individuals who were born in December 1981 distinctly different than individuals born in January 1982? Scholars, furthermore, cite
several starting dates for the Millennial generation—in 1977 (Mitchell, 1998; The New Strategists, 2004), in 1980 (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000), and in 1981 (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). The limited consensus delineating the beginning of the current generation and the end of the previous generation contributes to the difficulty of the time interval model.

The linear concept of a generation is also problematic, in part, because it lacks an explanation as to how societal events shape people. An individual born in 1992, for example, may recognize Tiananmen Square as the 2008 Olympic venue rather than the location of a major massacre in 1989 (Beloit College, 2008). Major events such as these influence people born during different decades in divergent ways. Historical events are continuous; therefore, finding “the natural beginning of a generation series” is more variable than this model suggests (Mannheim, 1928/1996, p. 111). In addition, Howe and Strauss’ (1991) theory references first waves of a generation: those at the beginning of the 20-year span, and later waves: those toward the end of the 20-year span. This position suggests that members of generations differ simply by an earlier or later birth year indicating a fluidity that the linear model does not take into account. Furthermore, this approach infers commonality in order to classify members as a generation.

The generational cohort model expands the generation definition beyond birth year; however, limitations still exist. A cohort is classified by attributing a set of similar roles, attitudes or behaviors, such as health behaviors or political attitudes, to a population or a group with a similar life experience (Eyerman & Turner, 1998; Kertzer, 1983). College students or war veterans, for example, are considered a cohort. Even though this approach has been utilized, (Cavalli; 2004; Cribier, 1981; Farge, 1977; Tsukashima & Montero, 1976), Kertzer (1983) argued that researchers who focus on the cohort model often employ dual
generational definitions that link genealogical relationships and historical periods. Criber (1981) examined changes in the retirement patterns of Parisian salaried workers in the 1970s. Social changes were occurring at the time, particularly high levels of youth unemployment that contributed to retirement policies, however the categorizations are still tied to birth year. Farge (1977) explored generational differences regarding Chicano health care behavior and classified participants based on their perception of health care, yet socioeconomic status was a strong determining factor in participants' attitudes. Tsukashima and Montero (1976), studying changes in Black anti-Semitism, outline the difficulty in the cohort approach. Their description of cohorts and generations is defined by age although they attempt to link them by attitudes. The cohort conceptualization can be difficult to understand because the model allows generations to vary in time and duration, even though they may also be synchronous. Cavalli (2004), for example, outlined that political generations vary in length from including several cohorts to consisting only of a few age cohorts. As depicted, the cohort paradigm in isolation does not provide a clear understanding of the composition of a generation.

Researchers utilizing the life stage model of generations create muddled depictions. Kertzer (1983) illustrated several examples of limited distinctions between and among age-related, life-stage, or descent-relationship differences in research that has focused on life stages. For example, life stage theorists often indicate they are focused on life stage, but then report their findings based on either age or cohort effects. Because of the intertwined nature of these elements, clear-cut distinctions are difficult to identify and to research.

Generational philosophy has become more comprehensive over time, but the conceptualization has not proven steadfast for all members of each wave of writers. Dilemmas exist regardless of whether the focus is on a kinship, linear time interval, cohort,
or a life stage model and are insufficient to understand the complexity of generation development. This study explored a new conceptualization based on personal and societal attributes as related to four generation effects—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—in order to delineate the complexity (see Table 1.1). By probing the personal and societal attributes, a more accurate portrait of the current cohort of college students within the Millennial generation will be unveiled.

Table 1.1

*Generation Effects and Key Authors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
<th>Societal Attributes</th>
<th>Key Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Interval</td>
<td>stage of life; birth order; family size</td>
<td>Size; attitude toward age groups</td>
<td>Mannheim (1928/1996); Strauss &amp; Howe (1991); Conley (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort</td>
<td>membership identification</td>
<td>societal perception of group</td>
<td>Levine &amp; Cureton (1998); Nyhart; Strauss &amp; Howe (1991); Roberts &amp; Lang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period</td>
<td>family situation; family educational attainment; race/ethnicity; sex; economic prosperity; political affiliation; class year</td>
<td>economic outlook; political influences; war vs. peace time; crisis; global influence; technological advancement; historical change</td>
<td>Edmonds &amp; Turner; Levine &amp; Cureton; Picardo; Bourdieu; Strauss &amp; Howe (1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>attitudes about family life, sex roles, institutions, education, politics, religion, lifestyle and the future</td>
<td>attitudes about family life, sex roles, institutions, education, politics, religion, lifestyle and the future</td>
<td>Levine &amp; Cureton (1998); Strauss &amp; Howe; Cavalli; Roberts &amp; Lang; Dunham</td>
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Howe and Strauss (2000) have identified the current youth generation as the Millennials. They have categorized members of this generation by seven defining persona
THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

traits—special, sheltered, team-oriented, achieving, confident, pressured, and conventional. Scholars have challenged whether or not this is an adequate description of college-aged students and, therefore, further exploration is necessary (Alter, 1991; Bonfiglio, 2008; Eddleman, 2010; Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007; Hesel & May, 2007; Newton, 2000; Sanchez, 2003).

Problem of the Study

This study was designed to examine the extent to which the current cohort of college students represents a more multifaceted picture than Howe and Strauss’ (2000) Millennial categorization has delineated. Strauss and Howe (1991) are the noteworthy contemporary generational theorists who define a generation as “a special cohort-group whose length approximately matches that of a basic phase of life, or about twenty-two years” (p. 34). According to Howe and Strauss, each cohort experiences four life phases—youth, rising, midlife, and elder—and develop a peer personality or common set of beliefs and behaviors. Members also share a common location in history and believe they belong to the generation. Strauss and Howe’s life phase theory emphasized the importance of a person’s “age-location” (p. 34). They assert that the central social roles, including historical events and societal attitudes, in place during a person’s youth inform us as to how members of the generation are likely to respond as they progress throughout life. Strauss and Howe contend that society experiences a turning or a change in mood era as each cohort progresses from one life phase to the next, and with each turning a new generational archetype is produced (Lifecourse Associates, 1999).

Significant questions have been raised about Strauss and Howe’s (1991) conceptualization of generations (Alter, 1991; Bonfiglio, 2008; Eddleman, 2010; Elam,
Stratton, & Gibson, 2007; Hesel & May, 2007; Newton, 2000; Sanchez, 2003) and the
categorization of Millennials. Researchers raise three areas of concern about Strauss and
Howe’s description of a generation. First, Howe and Strauss (2000) attempt to categorize all
members primarily by age ranges, yet they cite differences between first and later waves of
each generation. One could infer that clear-cut delineations of a generation cannot be
substantiated, potentially because of the continual societal influences that affect all members
of society, albeit differently (Alter, 1991). The desire to categorize people by a two-decade
time frame does not seem to adequately capture the unpredictability of a changing world.

Second, Strauss and Howe (1991) state, “the beliefs and behavior of a generation
never show up uniformly across all of its members” (p. 66); meanwhile the focus of the
descriptions are heavily geared toward the perceived norms without consideration to those
who fall outside the norm or are members within subsets of society (Bonfiglio, 2008;
Newton, 2000; Sanchez, 2003). Therefore, the attitudes and behaviors of diverse groups are
perceived differently and cannot be generalized in the generational definitions, which ignores
a large portion of society. Last, describing historical events and societal attitudes and
behaviors contextualizes Strauss and Howe’s description of generations. Missing from this
depiction, and other generational theorists understanding, is the influence of personal
attitudes and behaviors (Cavalli, 2004).

Three primary areas of concern are evident regarding the methods and assumptions
by which Howe and Strauss arrived at their description of Millennials (Hesel & May, 2007).
First, contradictions exist between the data and the subsequent conclusions about the cohort
(Bonfiglio, 2008; Hesel & May, 2007; Newton, 2000); second, the rigor of Howe and
Strauss’ Class of 2000 Study, which served as a basis for many of their claims, has been
challenged (Bonfiglio, 2008; Hesel & May, 2007), and are challenged again as part of this study; and last, they disregard personal and societal influences that may contribute to a generational response as will be outline in the literature review (Bonfiglio, 2008; Hesel & May, 2007; Newton, 2000).

The problem of this study was to discover the complexity of the four generation effects (time interval, cohort, period, and attitude) by probing the personal and societal attributes to create a more accurate portrait of the current cohort of college students within the Millennial generation. Through interviews with traditional-aged undergraduates at two higher education institutions (HEIs), this qualitative study was guided by the following five research questions:

1) How do current students perceive their personal attributes in the effects of time interval, cohort, period, and attitude?
2) What relationships and interrelationships exist among the four effects in personal attributes?
3) How do current students perceive their societal attributes in the effects of time interval, cohort, period, and attitude?
4) What relationships and interrelationships exist among the four effects in societal attributes?
5) To what degree do these elements and attributes combine to enhance a portrait of Millennial college students?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how the personal and societal attributes as related to four generation effects—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—create a
portrait of the current cohort of college students within the Millennial generation. This research sought to understand generations from more than one viewpoint that has been the prevailing method of exploring and defining generations. By combining the perspectives, a more holistic understanding of generations will provide depth to our understanding of this group of students and how faculty and student affairs staff might think and react to them. In addition our theoretical approach to the study of generations will be enhanced.

Scholars confirm that generational definitions are limited and cannot fully describe all members of any generation (Bonfiglio, 2008; DiMartini, 1985; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Jaeger, 1985; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Pichardo, 2006). Questions must also be raised as to whether a full understanding of a generation can by understood based on the early years of human development as suggested by Howe and Strauss (2000). Generational theorists accept that generations are partially defined by significant societal events or individuals encountering new aspects of life, such as the college environment. This research is relevant to higher education because the Millennials are currently on college campuses, and many higher education administrators and faculty have embraced Howe and Strauss’ definition without much consideration of the limitations of their research and seemingly without having evaluated other possible viewpoints. Anticipated changes on college and university campuses and the traditional student population require a closer examination of the Millennial depiction. Furthermore, Howe and Strauss’ research was conducted a decade prior to this study. Therefore, the participants in this study are likely very different.

Generational definitions have focused on the norms of society and the definitions are based on those who have the resources and power to influence. Several authors warn that these descriptions can never fully describe everyone in a generational grouping (Bonfiglio,
2008; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Zemke et al., 2000), yet it is easy for people to embrace these impressions without further consideration. Normative data always include outliers, thus, higher education administrators and faculty must consider students individually. For example, within any college classroom educators can expect to find a range of motivation and abilities, therefore, not all students will be high achieving as Howe and Strauss (2000) suggest.

Enrollments on college campuses are expected to continue to escalate through 2016 particularly for students over the age of 25 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). In the next nine years, a 14% increase in enrollment is expected partially due to the increased size of the current youth population. The Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse group in our nation’s history (DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000), and the diversity of college enrollment is expected to increase between now and 2017: 26% for Blacks, 39% for Hispanics, 26% for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 30% for American Indian/Alaska Natives, and 1% for nonresident aliens (Husser & Bailey, 2008). In 2000, nearly 40% of the population under 18 was non-Caucasian, and more people are also from multiracial backgrounds (Briodo, 2004). However, most of the Millennial research does not reveal how these populations differ, even though evidence to suggest that traditionally-defined minority groups do not believe the Millennial description is accurate for them (Piccardo, 2006).

With a challenged economic outlook, resources on college campuses have and will continue to become more limited. Resource allocation and program funding has been publically scrutinized and will continue to be challenged. Because of the concerns about the Millennial description, decision-making cannot be based upon a depiction of students that
may not be accurate whether inside or outside the classroom. Furthermore, the last of the Millennial generation, if accurate, should arrive on colleges campuses in 2018.

Although Howe and Strauss (2000) depict Millennials as achieving and confident, Wilson (2004) argued they do not automatically expend the amount of effort they need to exert in order to obtain their goals and aspirations. According to the CIRP data, over two-thirds of college freshmen believe they are in the top 10% on the measurement of academic ability (Pryor et al., 2007), albeit this figure has changed less than 5% since 1966. Faculty will continue to interact with students who are similarly overconfident rather than experience more overconfident students. Coupling this over-confidence with more involved parents, who have advocated for and closely monitored their children’s progress throughout their elementary and secondary education, today’s college students may not have developed the skills to think critically or with greater complexity. Wilson, supporting this contention, suggests that students may require more structured instruction and assignments along with clear expectations. Furthermore, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2008) suggests that a range of student preparedness for college exists and that not all students are high achieving. Of the 2008 NSSE respondents, 22% were identified as highly prepared versus 27% underprepared. Underprepared students appear to be less engaged in the college environment, receive lower grades, are less likely to believe they were going to graduate from their current institution, are less satisfied with their institution, and tend to be first-generation students (NSSE, 2008). Evidence that students arrive on campuses with a range of educational preparedness must be considered when developing classroom instruction.

Outside the classroom, student affairs professionals must be cognizant of and responsive to the changes that occur as each new class enters and progresses through college
and not simply rely on the Millennial description or any other generational definition. The
students on every college campus have a unique profile and culture. Developing an
understanding of these distinctive characteristics in relation to the broader context of the
world will allow services for students to be more aligned with their current needs.

The college environment serves as a catalyst for students to grow and develop.
Newton (2000) argued that Millennials contend with developmental issues similar to those
that previous college students have faced, such as, forming peer relationships, developing
career skills, and determining a life purpose. Moreover, an abandonment of previous
theoretical understandings should not occur; instead post-secondary staff must continue to
engage in assessment of the student body locally and nationally. However, staff should be
aware that the theoretical underpinnings of the past may not apply consistently as college
student priorities and influences change and evolve. College students may develop
differently than previous students particularly because of parental influences, an increase in
multitasking activity, the influence of technology, and the diverse demography of the cohort.
Therefore, developmental differences may not necessarily appear because they belong to the
so-called Millennial generation. When Generation X was on campus the literature on student
development broadened and began to focus on gender, race, age, and sexual orientation
(Strange, 2004). This research will further contribute to our understanding of students at the
beginning and end stages of their collegiate career and assist with determining other aspects
of student development that are important to consider as college students change.

Whether the seven Millennial persona characteristics suggested by Howe and Strauss
(2000) accurately describe current college students, the mood and attitudes of college
students do change. Implications exist if higher education faculty and staff merely endorse
this understanding or if they develop a more complete understanding of their student population. An oversimplification, in either case, may exclude some of the more at risk students. Higher education administrators and faculty, therefore, are obligated to be aware of the implications of simply embracing generational categorizations as a way to instruct, interact, or inform decisions made on college campus.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

A delimitation of the study was collecting data from two institutions that were located within close proximity, due to limited study duration and resources. Also a limited number of individuals were interviewed and included members of only two college class years—freshman and senior years. These two years were selected in order to understand students as they enter the institution and as they are depart. In addition, because it is widely accepted that the college years have an impact on student development, by selecting participants in from these class years I was able to consider these potential differences.

The second delimitation was the criteria used to select participants. With a small number of individuals being interviewed, it was impossible to represent all racial/ethnic groups or individuals from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Although the criteria set forth in the study assisted with selecting a diverse sample, the main purpose of the study is not to discover if Millennials from different racial/ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds are different. Furthermore, participants were selected from two mid-Atlantic public universities that are mandated legislatively to have high in-state student populations. Therefore, geographic diversity of the participants is limited.
The third delimitation was that this study was only focused on the current college-aged students and other generations were not represented. The purpose of this study was to focus on college-aged Millennials.

A potential limitation was the timing of the study. The world is unpredictable and if a significant world event were to occur at the time of the study, participants may respond with these considerations in mind. For example, just prior to data collection on one campus, a state government official encouraged state colleges to rescind anti-discrimination policies protecting students and employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Student protests occurred and was discussed more prominently by these participants. Furthermore, the United States has been in a state of uncertainty for many months and the residual impact of a country that is weary due to our military involvement abroad, the recession, job losses, and a changing political climate might potentially influence participants’ perspectives regarding some aspects of the study. Additionally, if any of these factors were to rapidly shift in the opposite direction, participants could be influenced and could affect their viewpoints. Therefore, this study is only reflective of the current climate in the United States at the time the participants were interviewed. Also, participation in the study was voluntary; therefore, students who elected not to participate might have valuable information to share that cannot be represented.
CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

The problem of the study was to discover the complexity of the four generation effects—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—by probing the personal and societal attributes to compose a more developed portrait of the current cohort of college students within the Millennial generation. This chapter first provides an overview of the three germinal generational theorists in recent history and reviews concerns associated with their models. A description of the importance of both personal and societal attributes will be shared. The four generation effects, as I have determined, are then described and linked to earlier generational theorists. A description of current living generations will be outlined along with descriptions of overlapping characteristics. Finally, a discussion about college students as they relate to generational definitions will be described highlighting the current college student generation, referred to as Millennials. The summary of the literature emphasizes the importance of developing an understanding of college students that moves beyond the stereotypical generalizations that generational theory can perpetuate.

Germinal Generational Theorists

The works of three germinal generational theorists, Karl Mannheim and William Strauss and Neil Howe, guided this study and have been a point of reference for those who have attempted to decipher the multifaceted complexity of generational development. Mannheim (1928/1996) shifted the conceptualization of generations from an historical perspective to a sociological one; Strauss and Howe (1991) have examined generational development from a contemporary perspective and have been prominent in the discussion
regarding the current youth generation known as Millennials. Even though their models have enhanced our understanding, limitations are also evident and require further examination.

**Karl Mannheim**

Mannheim’s (1928/1996) watershed work, *The Problem of Generations* (1928), transformed our understanding of generations from a positivist and historical perspective to a sociological one by examining generational development through more than one lens. Mannheim contended that generations were more than a concrete group of people; rather they have a common social location. Mannheim further argued that generations are more multifaceted than the function of people being born, aging, and then dying, rather each birth cohort share a common history. Inherent in being a member during a common social and historical time, cultural norms of the society is imposed on individuals through acceptable behaviors, feelings, and thoughts. Mannheim reasoned that separate generation units are formed and influenced by social change. A component of the social change is experiencing “fresh contact” (p. 125) or meeting someone new. Mannheim identified five aspects which contribute to the evolution of generations:

1. New participants in the cultural process are emerging, whilst, 2] former participants in that process are continually disappearing; 3] members of any one generation can participate only in a temporarily limited section of the historical process, and 4] it is therefore necessary continually to transmit the accumulated cultural heritage; [and] 5] the transition from generation to generation is a continuous process. (pp. 124-125)

Attempting to dispute the 30-year time interval argument, which was prominently held at the time, Mannheim (1928/1996) asserted that the continuous nature of the birth-death
cycle made it difficult to establish the beginning of each generation except in individual families due to the natural progression of children marrying. Mannheim further argued the importance of understanding regional and cultural influences regarding similar events. Using a relatively contemporary example, Blacks and Whites in America experienced the Civil Rights movement in distinctly different ways. Previous generational philosophers would have defined these individuals as a part of the same generation; whereas Mannheim would have suggested that they were both only a part of a generation unit. Certainly, their reactions to the historical problems of the time were ultimately divergent and built upon their cultural value systems and life experiences.

Questions have been raised about Mannheim’s generational argument (DiMartini, 1985; Dunham 1998; Jaeger, 1985; Roberts & Lang, 2001; Vaidhyanahan, 2008). Jaeger (1985) argued Mannheim’s conception is inconsistent. For instance, Mannheim stated that generations do not occur at a regular time interval, while also arguing a continuous cycle of generational changes. Roberts and Lang’s (2001) study of 28 years of college students explored cohort effects during the 1960s and challenged the assumption that the formative years are the sole contributor developing a generational recollection or attitude, specifically related to activism. Roberts and Lang found that only 5% of the variance was attributed to generational cohorts. Attitudes related to activism were largely influenced by familial background rather than merely being young during a particular time in history, suggesting that family values also influence generational differences.

Dunham (1998) tested Mannheim’s theory focusing on intergenerational continuity, generational consciousness, and generational experiences related to activism. The sample was randomly selected from the Longitudinal Study of Three Generations. Criteria for
inclusion in the study included the father having at least one child between the ages of 18 and 26.\footnote{The age of the participants in this study is significant because Dunham approximates a generation to fall within the 20-year increment argument. Furthermore, traditionally-aged college students are 18-24 year-olds. At the time of the study, 42.6\% of respondents were in college.} Dunham found generational consciousness, particularly attitudes, was most significant. Within parental contact, the mother’s attitude was influential. This finding implies that familial influence contributed to generational changes more than fresh contact. Attending college and being single were other contributors. Although Mannheim broadened modern day thinking about generations, problems with a linear, time-constricted model still exist.

**William Strauss and Neil Howe**

Strauss and Howe (1991) are the noteworthy contemporary generational theorists who define a generation as “a special cohort-group whose length approximately matches that of a basic phase of life, or about twenty-two years” (p. 34). This conceptualization is rooted in a constructivist perspective with each cohort experiencing four life phases—youth, rising, midlife, and elder—and developing a peer personality or common set of beliefs and behaviors. Members also share a common location in history and believe they belong to the generation. Strauss and Howe’s life phase theory emphasized the importance of a person’s “age-location” (p. 34). They asserted that the central social roles in place during a person’s youth, which includes historical events and societal attitudes, inform how members of the generation are likely to respond as they progress throughout life. Strauss and Howe contended that society experiences a *turning* or a change in mood era as each cohort progresses from one life phase to the next with each turning producing a new generational archetype (Lifecourse Associates, 1999).

The major criticisms of Strauss and Howe’s (1991; 2000) theory are focused on their depiction of the current college-aged generation, Millennials, which will be discussed later.
However, two areas of concern are raised by their description of a generation. First, they attempt to categorize all members primarily by age ranges, yet they cite differences between first and later waves of each generation. One could infer that clear-cut delineations of a generation cannot be substantiated because continual societal influences may affect all members of society, but differently. The desire to categorize people by a two-decade time frame cannot adequately capture the fluidity of a changing world. Second, Strauss and Howe (1991) state, “the beliefs and behavior of a generation never show up uniformly across all of its members,” yet their descriptions are heavily geared toward norms without consideration given to subsets of society.

In addition, generations seem to develop with more fluidity than the rigid time intervals proposed by Strauss and Howe (1991) and others before them. Discrepancies delineating the beginning and end points of generations exist throughout the literature. The inception of the Millennial generation, for example, is hypothesized to commence at a variety of starting points—1977 (Mitchell, 1998; The New Strategists, 2004), 1980 (Zemke, et al., 2000), 1981 (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002), 1982 (Coombs, 2004; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Strauss and Howe are two of many who perpetuate the stilted conception of generational definitions. The purpose of this study is to analyze the data from multiple perspectives to define a new conceptual framework consisting of four-generation effects examined from both a personal and societal perspective.

**Personal and Societal Attributes**

Generational theorists have examined generational development frequently based on societal influences such as war, crisis, and prevailing attitudes (Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Mannheim, 1928/1996; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Little attention has been focused on
individual events such as those personally experienced in their families or communities or the attitudes with which individuals have responded to the broad societal and generational issues that exist or occur during their lifetime. Scholars suggest that these influences may also contribute to generational development (Dunham, 1998; Roberts & Lang, 2001). As will be described, each effect—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—has elements that relate to the individual and to the broader society. Because generational philosophy has not explained characteristics for all members of a generation, as a two-decade increment, a gap exists in the literature regarding the personal attributes that result or occur throughout a person’s lifetime and affect their development throughout their lifetime, and, in effect, their defined generation and in particular their response to societal issues.

**Four-Generation Effects**

The generational concept has been pondered for many centuries and has typically been analyzed from an historical or sociological perspective, which appears to no longer be sufficient (Jaeger, 1985; Kertzer, 1983; Mannheim, 1928/1996; Strauss & Howe, 1991). The assumption has been a common understanding of how to define a generation (Cavalli, 2004; DiMartini, 1985; Dunham, 1998; Guardo, 1982; Kertzer, 1982; Mannheim, 1928/1996; Strauss & Howe, 1991), although each definition of generations engenders different parameters and thus meanings. Kinship generation definitions have focused on familial relationships. Linear time interval ranges have been understood as a generation being defined by over a period of time. Generations as a cohort are more complex, but typically focus on a period of time or a common experience such as attending college. Last, life stage generational definitions combine cohort, time interval, and age of the generation. Even though the components of the definitions are different, the perception is a common
understanding of a generation, while interpretations vary greatly. By delineating generations by these categorical limitations, the complexity of generational development is stunted and does not capture the interplay of the contributing effects.

**Time Interval Effect**

Throughout the generational literature, time interval effects are commonly viewed by time frames, kinship, or stage of life conceptualizations. Additional aspects of this effect include size of the generation, the societal attitudes toward any particular age group, birth order, and family size. Generational theorists have been bound by a linear time interval conceptualization. Generations have been hypothesized to range from a single year or event to a 30-year time frame (Guardo, 1982; Levine, 1980; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Mannheim, 1928/1996; Marias, 1967; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Auguste Comte, writing in the early 19th century, postulated that a generation spans a person’s lifetime and each span lasted approximately a 30-year time period (Mannheim, 1928/1996; Mariás, 1967). Comte explored the tempo of historical change based on succeeding generations (Jaeger, 1985; Mariás, 1967). According to Mannheim, Comte speculated that as life spans lengthened, the pace of progress would slow because the older generations would influence society for longer periods of time. Future generational theorists have not supported this contention and have reduced the generational timeframe to a 20- to 25-year increment, yet life span has increased dramatically. At the other extreme, cohort theorists have focused on a particular year or significant event to define a generation, such as the Vietnam draft (Edmonds & Turner, 2002).
Mannheim attempted to address the challenge of the long generation time frame and the subgroups that form within these delineations by focusing on generation units (Edmonds & Turner, 2002). Mannheim (1928/1996) explained:

Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units. (p. 134)

At the crux of Mannheim's argument is the assertion that separate generation units develop independently and were influenced by social change, and therefore subsets are formed within each, so-called generation.

Early generational theorists focused their attention on kinship due to the ease of linking family offspring with the development of a new generation. The biological function of being born, aging, and dying is a simplistic view of generational development. As philosophers recognized generations were more complex, other aspects such as social location, class status, or historical influences were hypothesized to influence the development (Mannheim, 1928/1996).

Philosophers have conceptualized the influence of stage of life on generational development differently. Mannheim’s (1928/1996) concept of “fresh contact” or experiencing something anew is a pivotal component of his understanding of generations (p. 125). For Mannheim, a pivotal component time occurs when an adolescent leaves home; in contemporary society, one could argue this occurs when a child goes to college.

On the other hand, a focal component of Strauss and Howe’s (1991) conceptualization is the phases of life. They argue that each generation experiences four life
phases—youth, rising, midlife, and elder—each lasting approximately twenty-two years. They further suggested the importance of a person’s “age-location” (p.34). Strauss and Howe asserted that the central social roles, including historical and societal attitudes in place during a person’s youth, inform how members of the generation are likely to respond as they progress throughout life.

Generation theorists have focused their concern primarily on the formative years related to the life phase and the size of the generation. Contemporary American society has been attentive to the size of larger generations such as the Baby Boomers or the Millennials (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Due in part to the strain larger generations place on social domestic policy issues and services as well as the group’s influence on society because of the sheer number of members, society has been forced to take notice of their needs and impact. In turn, attitudes towards a particular age group may develop positively or negatively, which will influence how the rest of society responds to that generation.

Finally, within the time interval effect scholarship, birth order and family size or constellation have been investigated to determine how these factors contribute to personality development, academic attainment, sexual orientation, and success among other variables without fully being able to determine how the factors intersect (Conley, 2005). Because it is unclear how generations develop on an individual spectrum, it is not unreasonable to question if birth order and family constellation also contribute to how members of a generation develop.

Time interval effect has been primarily viewed from a time range, kinship or stage of life viewpoint. Based on the generational literature, other factors emerge that are necessary
to consider. The current conceptualizations of generational development are limited and other aspects should also be considered such as the next effect, cohort.

Cohort Effect

Theorists conceptualizing generations from a cohort perspective recognize another layer exists in the complexity of understanding generations. Cohort theorists focus on a period of time and a common experience, such as attending college, but create flexibility that the linear conceptualizations do not (Cavalli, 2004; Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Jaeger, 1985; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Mariás, 1967; Nyhart, 1995; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Included in cohort effect are membership identification and societal perceptions of the group.

Writing in the late-19th century, Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first philosophers to limit the assessment of generations to a cohort or a group with a commonality, specifically with adolescents (Jaeger, 1985; Mariás, 1967). Dilthey recognized that generations more than merely succeed each other; they co-exist (Mannheim, 1928/1996). Building on Dilthey’s definition of simultaneous generations, Wilhelm Pinder asserted in the early-20th century that each generation builds its own “entelechy” or their “inner aim” (Mannheim, 1928/1996, p. 116). Coupling Dilthey and Pinder’s assertions about generations reveals a complexity that is not understood by simply viewing generations from the time interval effect perspective and that a generation is comprised of more than individuals born at a similar time. Edmunds and Turner (2002) contend that Mannheim’s generation unit conception was an attempt to grapple with cohorts within a specific age range, even though Mannheim did not identify the generation units in this fashion. Furthermore, Strauss and Howe’s (1991) generational theory claims that an essential component of being a part of a generation is the belief that a member belongs, which also supports the cohort concept.
Nyhart's (1995) examination of 19th century German morphologists or biologists studying the structure or form of plants and animals described the cohort generation perspective and difficulties the linear aspect of generations poses. According to Nyhart, members of each morphologist cohort were born during a relatively short window, ten years or less, but their conceptualization of the natural evolution of science spanned from a 15 to a 40-year period. In this example, the birth range of morphologists was smaller than the previously defined generation ranges, yet scientific thought spanned a greater timeframe. Depending on which component, time range interval or scientific thought, morphologist generations would be defined differently.

Cohort effects explain additional elements that contribute to generational development beyond the time interval effect conceptualization. Roberts and Lang (2001) in their study of college students concluded that the cohort model is not the only factor influencing generational differences in attitudes over time. They suggested that family background is more significant than being a part of a particular cohort. Still, as Roberts and Lang indicated, noteworthy aspects of generational development are not explained by this effect either. Although each of the effects contributes a layer to the generational puzzle, individually the effects are not satisfactory, as they do not intertwine all of the elements.

**Period Effect**

The majority of theorists who have examined period effects have focused on the influence of societal historical events or crises on a generation of people. The media, for example, has referenced a post-9/11 generation (Jayson, 2009; Kalb, 2009; Noonan, 2009). An examination of early generational theorists and their attempt to wrestle with the impact of period effects on generations is important to understand.
The Positivists (Mannheim, 1928/1996), who posited that knowledge could be gained through an objective analysis, were the first philosophers to discuss generations in terms of human relationships changing. In the mid-1700s, David Hume attempted to link the biological process of aging with the political process, the paramount issue of the time. Describing the succession of human generations as resembling the morphing process of a caterpillar as it transitions into a butterfly, Hume believed as a generation disappeared a new generation was born (Mannheim, 1928/1996). According to Mannheim (1928/1996), Hume suggested that humans have the ability to make choices about the governmental structure and each generation has the capacity to redefine the structure.

Justin Dromel and Giuseppe Ferrari, writing in the mid-19th century, focused on political generations (Jaeger, 1985). Like Hume, Dromel and Ferrari attempted to link biological generations with historical milestones or collective history. The biological component assumed a natural rhythm, which is difficult to quantify. Therefore, the linkage is difficult to determine.

The notion of generational development related to external influences commenced with François Mentré, an early 20th century philosopher (Jaeger, 1985). Mentré primarily examined generations utilizing the family structure attempting to link successive generations with societal changes. Mentré proposed a “rhythm in the sequence of generations” and “essential changes” (Mannheim, 1928/1996, p. 112) occurring in approximately 30-year intervals. The idea of societal influences contributing to generational development continues to underscore contemporary generational theories.

In the early 20th century, Jose Ortega y Gasset defined a generation as “coetaneous cohorts, born within zones of dates which make them the same age virtually and historically”
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(Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 65) and each generation is “a new integration of the social body”
(as cited in Schlesinger, 1986, p. 30). Ortega y Gasset suggested each generation has a
mission unique to them (Kertzer, 1983), and further argued that individuals face crises and
during these crises people go through a “period of transition” (Sebastian, 1963, p. 491) from
an old way of life to a new way of life. Mentré and Ortega y Gasset’s generational
definitions depicted a more sophisticated description of generations.

Although these early generational theorists contributed to our current understanding
of a generation, their limited conception does not portray the complex nature of generations
and the interplay of individual and societal events. Pinder’s assertion exemplifies that
limitations exist in utilizing the “generational phenomenon because different classes or strata
of society will respond differently to life circumstances particularly during adolescent
development” (Jaeger, 1985, p. 278).

Bourdieu (1993) proposed that generational conflict can be described as “clashes
between systems of aspirations formed in different periods” (p. 99). Previous generations,
for example, worked a significant amount of time to gain a particular resource, and then, for
the new generation, the advantage is now expected. Therefore, conflicts form between the
generations due to discrepancies in understanding the importance of aspirations for each
generation. The same principle transpires between classes. Individuals from higher-
socioeconomic status are likely to obtain privileges not available to people from lower-
socioeconomic positions, but when the privileges become widespread, the same
disconnection occurs. Edmund and Turner (2005) suggest that the resources in question may
be economic, cultural, or social, and the discord results in social change.
Edmunds and Turner (2005) asserted that traumatic historical events such as war influence generational development. They further contended those cultural traumas that “are created and recreated through a variety of social processes by members of a national, social (or global) group” (p. 561) affect generations. Edmunds and Turner argued that generations have become global beginning with the 1960s when large parts of the world became concerned with the changes that occurred relating to the family, social welfare, consumerism, and racial and gender relations, such as increased women in the workforce. Further, they suggested that one of the causes of the development of the 1960s global generation was the influence of technology, particularly the mode of transmission of media communication. A parallel linkage can be made with the impact that the Internet has had on contemporary generations. Global changes have continued to occur related to health and lifestyle and the economic stability of the world. In the 1980s, for example, society focused on health and lifestyle issues due to the concern regarding HIV and AIDS. Edmunds and Turner suggested that the events on September 11, 2001 might be the beginning of the next defining global generation.

Thus, the conception of generations as defined by periods of time effects the lens used for analysis. However, the three effects described above, namely, time interval, cohort, and period, do not fully explain generational development. An examination of the factors attributed to the attitude effect is required.

**Attitude Effect**

Generational theorists continually have focused on developing an understanding of the common beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes attributed to the generation regardless of the type of interpretation—a linear time interval, cohort, life stage, period, or kinship (Edmunds
The aspects incorporated in attitude effect include personal and societal perspective regarding family life, sex roles, institutions, education, politics, religion, lifestyle, and the future.

Hume's understanding of political generations underscores this conception. Hume argued that generations have the ability to choose and modify their governmental structure (Mannheim 1928/1996). This perspective suggests that as attitudes, values, and priorities change about government or politics, the ability to transform these configurations also exist signifying a new political generation.

Mannheim (1928/1996) argued that the cultural norms prevalent at the time are imposed on people merely by their being members of society. Thus, the shared acceptable behaviors, feelings, and thoughts are preserved until these values are rejected or new ideas are infused. Strauss and Howe (1991) contended that as each generation develops a common set of beliefs and behaviors, a peer persona develops and is attributed to the generation.

Based on five surveys administered to 15- to 24-year olds between 1983 and 2000, Cavalli (2004) argued that the priority of values for this age group of participants have not varied greatly, although no comparison to the broader population or different age groupings is appropriate. Cavalli asserted that changes in value orientations occur when the society, as a whole, shifts. Meanwhile, Cavalli also argued that compared to earlier generations, 21st century youth appeared to be more focused on values in the private versus the public sphere. These conflicting viewpoints suggest a relationship between values or attitudes and generations, although a definitive understanding of the influences is unclear.

An important element to Strauss and Howe's (1991) theory of generations is the peer personality that develops. One component of the peer personality is the common attitudes or
beliefs that develop and become a factor in how members of the generation respond to events in the future. Strauss and Howe argued that the attitudes that form collectively are related to family life, sex roles, institutions, politics, religion, lifestyle, and the future, but ignored this aspect from a personal perspective. I am proposing that the above attitudes that were disregarded by Strauss and Howe’s work should be considered in addition to the societal perspective that permeates the generational literature.

Each of the four effects—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—contribute a different understanding to the generational conception, yet theorists have neglected to analyze generational development from this holistic perspective. Individuals and society have become more multifaceted; therefore, in order to understand this complexity our theoretical understanding must also expand. Before examining the Millennial generation, current living generations as described by Strauss and Howe (1991) will be discussed to assist with contextualizing the difficulty with the portrayal of the Millennial generation.

Living Generations

Four generations—Millennials, Generation X, Boomers, and the Silent generation—exist in current society, each with characteristics and traits attributed to them. These characterizations typify the perceived norms of the generation, however, some of the distinctiveness spans more than one generation. Strauss and Howe’s (1991) time frame and conceptualizations are utilized to define each generation.

Silent generation. The Silent generation was born between 1925 and 1942. They have stood in the shadows of the generation prior, the GI generation (1901-1924)—often called the greatest generation. Silents are characterized by their hard work and thriftiness, conformity, consistency, uniformity, sacrifice, value in the system, respect for authority, and
loyalty (Bartley, Ladd, & Morris, 2007; Johnson & Romanello, 2005; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Zemke et al., 2000). Silents have also been described as conventional similar to Millennials (Zemke et al., 2000), and dedicated like Boomers (Bartley et al., 2007; Zemke et al., 2000).

**Boomers.** The Baby Boomers were born between 1943 and 1960. Often depicted as the “me” generation, Boomers were the largest cohort until the Millennials appeared. Baby Boomers have been the focus of much of America’s attention due in part to their size and the subsequent continuous strain on the infrastructure related to domestic policies and services, and the civic changes that occurred in the United States during their youth. They are portrayed as rebellious, free-spirited, competitive, equate work with self-worth, driven, dedicated, and cause oriented (Bartley et al., 2007; Johnson & Romanello, 2005; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Zemke et al., 2000). Similar to Millennials they value team-oriented work and are optimistic (Bartley et al., 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000). Two characteristics are similar to Generation X: opposition to their parents (Strauss & Howe, 1991), and pragmatism (DeBard, 2004). Additionally, scholars have acknowledged the Silent trait of hardworking in the Boomers (Bartley et al., 2007; Zemke et al., 2000).

**Generation X.** Generation X was born between 1961 and 1981. Douglas Coupland (1991), in his narrative book, *Generation X*, has been credited with coining the term for this generation. Societal expectations have been minimal and individuals in this generation have been primarily characterized by negative characteristics (Strauss & Howe, 1991). They have been described as skeptical, resourceful, antagonistic to their parents, equally prioritize work and leisure time, and anxious when faced with the decisions of adulthood (Gordon & Steele, 2005; Johnson & Romanello, 2005; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000).
Additional definitions include insecure, ambivalent, self-reliant, pragmatic, and lazy (Bartley et al., 2007; DeBard, 2004; Gordon & Steele, 2005, Wolburg & Pokrywcynski, 2001; Tenofsky, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000). When portrayed in a positive light, GenXers share characteristics with other generations. When compared with Millennials, confident, technologically savvy, goal orientated, optimistic, and diverse (Bartley et al., 2007; Gordon & Steele, 2005; Levine, 1998; Tenofsky, 2006; Wolburg & Pokrywcynski, 2001; Zemke et al., 2000), and with Boomers determined (Wolburg & Pokrywcynski, 2001) are shared characteristics.

**Millennials.** The Millennials were born beginning in 1982 through 2002. Terms such as Generation Y, Nexters, Echo Boomers, and the net.generation all have been used to identify the Millennial generation. Touted as the next great or a future hero generation (DeBard, 2004; Strauss & Howe, 1991), high expectations have been established for this generation. Generally, Millennials have been depicted in a positive light; and the negative aspects often have been overlooked (Bonfiglio, 2007; Newton, 2000). Howe and Strauss (2000) described seven persona traits—special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, achieving, pressured, and conventional—to portray this generation. Other depictions have included optimistic, technologically savvy, civically minded, moral, goal oriented, diverse, balanced, pragmatic, hardworking, and respectful of authority (Alch, 2000; Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge, & Odgen, 2007; Bartley et al., 2007; DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Gordon & Steele, 2005; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Tenofsky, 2006; Wolburg & Pokrywcynsi, 2001; Zemke et al., 2000). Of these descriptions, they share being balanced and pragmatic with Generation X and hardworking and respect for authority with Silents.
Noteworthy attention has been attributed to the differences when describing generations. After reviewing the literature, no author specifically cited similarities between the generations even though descriptors both coincide and conflict. I discovered the overlapping characteristics after charting the literature based on the authors’ depictions. The characteristics and traits of current living generations have been discussed in academia along with popular culture.

**College Student Generations**

Less attention in the literature has been given to college student generations with the exception of students of the 1960s until the recent fascination with Millennials. However, changes have occurred in higher education and with college students. Thelin, Edwards, and Moyer (2009) outline shifts that occurred for each of these generations. The Silent generation experienced the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act in 1944, known as the GI Bill, which created an avenue for an unprecedented number of veterans to obtain a postsecondary education. Baby Boomers were part of mass growth in higher education, which, in part, was attributed to the Higher Education Act of 1964 and 1972. These acts allowed for greater access to college, an affordable education, and the ability to choose with portable funding such as the Pell Grant. Boomers also observed or took part in the unrest on college campuses prior to and during the civil rights movement. During Generation X’s time on college campuses, although many governors were promoting their state’s colleges, fiscal concerns between 1990 and 1993 permeated due to declines in both the stock market and state revenues. Millennials have experienced an espoused paradigm shift from teaching to learning and also greater public concern about accountability in higher education and a continued decline in state support for college.
Researchers have argued the depictions of changes in college student generations occur at intervals dissimilar to the intervals proposed by generational theorists (Astin, Green, & Korn, 1987; Guardo, 1982; Levine, 1980; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). Guardo (1982) reported that different student generations existed from the late-50s to the early-80s. The students attending college in the late-50s and early-60s are described as conformers. During the mid-60s and later in the mid-70s, Guardo referenced two transition groups. In the late-60s and early-70s, Guardo described students as an alienated, hippy, uncommitted, and militant population that had arrived on campuses. In the early-80s, the mood and attitude of college students' changed as the me generation appeared. According to Guardo, each college student generation lasted approximately six years—a dramatically different time span than the 20-year timeframe that has been purported about the population in general.

When Levine (1980) first reported on college student generations, he depicted the generations by a decade, half the timeframe associated with population generationalists. According to Levine, students from different decades have been described in the following ways: the 1920s as “wet, wild, and wicked”; the 1930s as “somber and radical”; the 1940s as “mature and in a hurry”; the 1950s as “silent”; the 1960s as “angry and activists”; and the 1970s as “me orientated, optimistic about their personal future, but pessimistic about the future of the country, and pragmatic” (p.4, 131). In their follow-up study, Levine and Cureton (1998) explained that a college student generation is seven years in length and include the cohort plus the three classes of students who attend the institution with one or more of the initial cohorts (see Figure 2.1). Levine and Cureton reported that the change in attitudes of college students in the 1990s included being more optimistic about the future,
more socially involved, and changes in their life goal, that include being financial wealth and having a family.

Figure 2.1

*Levine and Cureton's Generation Length*

Other scholars support the proposition that the mood and attitude of college student generations transition differently than the larger population, in some areas more rapidly, while in other areas minimal change occurs (Guardo, 1982; Levine, 1980; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Pryor et al., 2007). With this in mind, along with the societal emphasis on the Millennial generation, higher education faculty and administrators have an obligation to be prepared for shifts to occur at dissimilar intervals and to be cautious about the stereotyping generation descriptions perpetuate. Because so many staff and faculty members at higher education institutions, along with other fields, have embraced the Millennial portrayal, it is important to highlight the many contradictions that permeate the literature regarding this group.

**Millennials**

Higher education institutions have focused a significant amount of attention to the current college student generation, Millennials. Admission officers have revamped their
recruitment strategies and resources have been spent marketing and programming for this population (Elam, et al., 2007; Hesel & May, 2007). Although people in the business sector, the media, and higher education seemingly have embraced Howe and Strauss’ (2000) description of Millennials, existing contradictory evidence should be examined before endorsing these stereotypes.

Questions have been raised about the accuracy of Howe and Strauss’ (2000) conceptualization in three areas. First, contradictions exist between Howe and Strauss’ data and the subsequent conclusions about the cohort; second, the rigor of Howe and Strauss’ Class of 2000 Study which served as a basis for many of their claims; and lastly, the disregard for societal influences that may contribute to a generational response. Because the focus of this paper is to examine the difficulty associated with defining college-aged students as the Millennial generation, a closer look at Howe and Strauss’ characterization of the defining seven persona characteristics is warranted.

**Special.** Babies born in 1982 and graduating from high school as the Class of 2000 received enormous media attention throughout their youth. Deemed “vital to the nation and to their parents’ sense of purpose” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 43), the message to Millennials has been about their importance to preceding generations.

**Sheltered.** From improvements in child safety devices to an increased emphasis on safety practices to the post-Columbine focus on safety in schools, children raised during this era have been the center “of the most sweeping youth safety movement in American history” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 43).
Confident. Millennials are highly optimistic and trusting. They have connected to their parents and to the future in new ways. They often “boast about their generation’s power and potential” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 44) to shape the nation.

Team-Oriented. The focal point of schools has been on collaborative and group learning. Couple this message with team sports and the trend in school uniforms, Millennials have “developed strong team instincts and tight peer bonds” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 44).

Achieving. The center of attention during the K-12 education of this generation’s youth has been accountability and increasing standards (Howe & Strauss, 2000). SAT scores have improved (College Board, 2005) and competition in admission into higher education institutions has increased (Farrell, 2006).

Pressured. Likely to avoid risks and take advantage of the multitude of opportunities accessible to them, the lifestyle of this generation tends to be overly structured. With high parental expectations for scholarly and personal success, Millennials feel “pressure to excel” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 44).

Conventional. This generation of youth has been immersed in a school setting focused on safety concerns and decreasing behavioral problems. They have also connected to the values of their parents and recognize the improvements they have made as a generation. Millennials, therefore, are supportive of “the idea that social rules can help” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 44).

Shortcomings in Millennial Definitions

Strauss and Howe’s (1991; 2000) conceptualization of generations particularly, their characterization of Millennials, has been challenged by a variety of scholars (Alter, 1991; Bonfiglio, 2008; Elam et al., 2007; Hesel 2007; Newton, 2000). Howe and Strauss (2000)
portray Millennials as a generation without difficulties. By only depicting today’s youth primarily from a positive perspective, a full understanding cannot be realized. Neglected in the depiction of Millennials are the children who have been expelled from school because they have threatened to kill a teacher or classmate, teen gangs, youth violence, and overweight teens. Howe and Strauss, for example, asserted that Millennials are the healthiest generation, but, they also reported children being resistant to bacteria, an increase in children born with mental retardation or autism, increased behavioral problems and ADD, and rapidly rising asthma rates in children that are higher than for adults (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The most significant discrepancy results from their claim about obesity. Howe and Strauss stated, “in 1994 the incidence of obesity has risen to 12 to 14 percent for grade school kids—roughly a 250 percent increase since the days of Boomer children” (p. 93). In addition, these children have high blood pressure, type-2 diabetes, and high levels of cholesterol. How can today’s youth be the healthiest generation while at the same time they are burdened with diseases, which typically develop at a later stage in life? Furthermore, because Howe and Strauss have made these observations, why are these descriptions not reflected in their seven persona characteristics?

Many of Howe and Strauss’ (2000) interpretations of Millennials are supported with national youth data, but frequently cited are the results of two studies (Class of 2000 Study and the Teachers Survey) they conducted. Both samples—students and teachers—were taken from the Fairfax County School system outside of Washington, D.C. The demographic information about the county, in general, is reported, but they neglected to collect demographic information from the sample. Fairfax County, as well, had “a median household income nearly twice that national average” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 376-377) at
the time of the study. If the participants in the study do not represent the larger national demographic, then the broad generalizations that have subsequently prevailed cannot be inferred to the larger population.

Hesel and May (2007) suggested other concerns with Howe and Strauss' methodology. Classroom teachers administered their survey, which raises questions about respondents' truthfulness. Three problems exist with this type of survey administration, 1) respondents may have felt pressure to answer in a particular way due to the teacher's presence, 2) the sample size consisted of approximately 660 students, therefore the number of teachers administering the survey raises concern in consistency of test administration, and 3) the responses were self-reported, with no method for triangulation of the data being offered. Furthermore, all responses of "don't know" or "not sure" were also eliminated before the percentages of responses were calculated, distorting the data. The reporting of results could easily be disputed due to the lack of rigor in the design of the research.

Strauss and Howe's (1991) generational theory also does not explain how events that occur during the development of a generation influence and shape the members in potentially dramatically different ways. The conjecture about Millennials has been based on a hopeful outlook in the nation. At the time of Howe and Strauss' (2000) writing, the youth generation had not experienced any "critical events" (p. 323) such as war or economic adversity. Even though the Gulf War occurred in 1990-1991, Millennials might have been too young to be influenced by the conflict. Howe and Strauss stressed, "no one can predict how a crisis would climax and what a new post crisis era would be like" (p. 355-356). And,

For such a generation, a collision with economic hard times or a major war poses a gigantic question mark. When a crisis comes, its harshness could
explode across young lives like a video game that is no longer virtual. And if, in its early stages, the crisis is not handled well, or if America’s leaders are mired in personal scandals or vendettas that undermine their ability to command sacrifice from others, or if fate takes a harsh turn, or if millions of young people find themselves suddenly out of work, then the familiar Millennial sunniness could turn sour. (p. 358)

These dynamics have taken place in America. Significant historical events have occurred since Howe and Strauss’ (2000) conceptualization of Millennials such as the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, a prolonged war in Iraq, the crisis in Darfur, a weakened economy, the decline of the housing market, the escalating cost of gasoline, and the downturn on Wall Street. In higher education, college costs have increased, students are being turned away particularly at community colleges, and some colleges have been forced to close their doors, which will have a yet unknown effect on future students. Noteworthy advances in technology, sustainability, and communication methods have transpired in the last decade that have dramatically changed how our society interacts within itself and with the world. To what extent have these recent historical events and societal shifts influenced people born before or after each of these changes? Further, are people affected differently depending on their geographic location, race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status? Even though historical events have occurred during the Millennial and prior generations, research that examines college student attitudes does not confirm any correlation between the two.

Moreover, research in higher education contradicts Howe and Strauss’ (2000) characterization of Millennial college students and their divergence from prior generations.
The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) has been collecting and analyzing data on American college freshmen through the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) for 40 years. The longitudinal data are in direct conflict with Howe and Strauss' depiction of current college students and dispel the contention that changes in attitudes attributed to college freshmen is related to their membership in the Millennial generation. Howe and Strauss asserted that Millennials are high achieving and self-confident. According to Pryor et al. (2007), CIRP respondents have been asked, since its inception, if they were above average or in the top 10% compared to the average person their age on both intellectual and social self-confidence. On both constructs, the number of respondents identifying positively has nearly doubled. Overall, college students of today are more self-confident than college students in the mid-1960s; however, similar high response rates have been reported since 1985 (Generation X). Thus, self-confidence is not merely a Millennial characteristic.

Another aspect that challenges Howe and Strauss' (2000) claim that the Millennial generation is vastly different from the previous generation relates to the top reason college students indicate they have elected to attend college. According to the CIRP data, college students have ranked "being very well off financially" as the top reason for attending college. Yet, the proportion of students citing this reason has changed less than 5% since the mid-1980s (Pryor et al., 2007), negating Howe and Strauss' claim this characteristic only applies to Millennials.

Howe and Strauss (2000) also contended that Millennials are team-oriented primarily because of the group requirements in high school and participation in team sports. Information extrapolated from Pryor's et al. (2007) analysis of CIRP data contradicts this contention. The number of college freshmen indicating they study with other students has
declined since the all-time high in 1967 and reached its lowest point in 2006. Students in Howe and Strauss’ Class of 2000 Survey reported studying or doing classroom research with other students “often” or “sometimes” 88% of the time. When asked whether or not they were expected to work on projects or papers with a team 77% reported “often” or “sometimes.” These differences do not appear large enough to support a claim that Millennials are more team-oriented than previous generations.

Further evidence does not support as optimistic a depiction of Millennials. Howe and Strauss (2000) stated this generation is more optimistic than the previous generation describing themselves as “happy, confident, and positive” (p. 7). Levine and Cureton’s (1998) study of undergraduate students in 1993, Generation X, contradicts this claim. Levine and Cureton reported the majority of college students indicated they were optimistic about their future and about the future of the United States. In contrast, in 1969 and 1976 the majority of respondents were “very apprehensive” (p. 30) about the future of the country. The majority of the 1993 cohort of students also believed individuals can bring about change, which is a shift from the earlier cohorts; a shift indicating that Generation X college students were also optimistic and that the shift in optimism did not occur for the Millennial generation.

Additional contradictory evidence regarding the optimistic persona attributed to Millennials exists. The Horatio Alger Foundation’s (2008), The State of Our Nation’s Youth, reported from 2003 to 2008 high school students’ optimism and hopefulness about the future of America declined significantly. Differences were described between African Americans, Hispanics, and Caucasians. With the vast majority of these teens expecting to attend college in the future, collegiate faculty and administrators will be required to understand the student
population with whom they are or will be working with in the future. Attention must be given to the differences particularly based on racial diversity differences. Pichardo’s (2006) study of Latino students, at two Hispanic serving institutions in the West, further emphasized why the Millennial portrayal does not represent all college students. Pichardo reported that Latinos in the study perceived majority college students to be described accurately by the Millennial characteristics, but as minority members, these descriptions did not represent them.

The above data support a different portrayal of college students than Howe and Strauss’ (2000) widely accepted understanding of Millennials. However, professionals within institutions and higher education organizations have embraced the Millennial description and have responded without critically analyzing the accuracy on a national level or from an individual student or institutional perspective. Because of the limitations in the methods behind Howe and Strauss’ study and the contradictory evidence, caution must be heeded about the Millennial description, particularly on college campuses.

**Summary of the Literature Review**

The literature related to generations paints a complex and multifaceted portrait in the understanding of generations. Although theorists have attempted to delineate how generations form, a more accurate analogy is that of the kaleidoscope with a number of attributes contributing to an intertwined and complex array. The relationships and interplay among the four generation variables—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—and the two attributes—personal and societal—have not been examined in a systematic way even though scholars have suggested such interactions.
Most generational theorists have examined generations from the perspective of differences, yet neglect the viewpoint of similarities. The business sector, media, and higher education have embraced the Millennial depiction even though the research is limited and flawed. Furthermore, college student generations develop in dissimilar ways and this perspective has been neglected. Therefore, this study proposed to explore creating a more developed portrait of Millennial college students and to reveal the complexity of generational development in the current youth or college age population.
CHAPTER 3

Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to outline how the research questions in the study were answered. Exploratory in nature, this study was designed to examine to what extent the current cohort of college students represents a more multifaceted picture than Howe and Strauss (2000) have depicted. The problem of the study is to discover the complexity of the four generation effects by probing the personal and societal attributes to compose a more developed portrait of the current cohort of college students within the Millennia} generation. In order to answer the research questions that arise from this problem, a qualitative approach was utilized and specifically, a multiple case study. The sections of this chapter present the research questions and the conceptual framework followed by the methodological tools employed along with the ethical safeguards and considerations taken.

Conceptual Framework

As I noted in chapter two, generational theorists have primarily examined generational development from four main effects—time interval, cohort, period or attitude, and have focused on either personal attributes or societal attributes. I propose a slightly different conceptualization of the categories building on the generation literature (see Table 3.1) suggesting that both personal and societal influences throughout life can affect individuals at any time. Human development appears to be far more complex than what is to be gained by isolating each component. To illustrate this conceptualization graphically, all eight components contribute to a generation (see Figure 3.1). In my proposed conceptual framework, both societal historical events and crises coupled with individual or personal events and crises are to be taken into account. The interplay of both personal and societal
moments and how they shape individuals are important to consider. Taken from the extant literature, the personal attributes include stage of life, birth order, family size, membership identification, family situation, family educational attainment, race/ethnicity, sex, economic prosperity, political affiliation, and for purposes of this study—class year. Furthermore,
individual attitudes about family life, sex roles, institutions, education, politics, religion, lifestyle, and the future comprise the personal attributes category.

Societal attributes include size of the generation, as compared to other generations, attitudes toward age groups, economic outlook, political influences, war versus peacetime, societal crisis, global influences, advancement in technology, and other historical changes. In addition, attitudes toward family life, sex roles, institutions, education, politics, religion, lifestyle, and the future were examined. My interview protocol was constructed from the elements isolated from the literature and comprises my conceptual framework (See Table 3.1).

**Paradigm**

This study is set in the interpretive paradigm. Rossman and Rallis (2003) define this paradigm as attempting to understand the social world according to the status quo and from the individual participant’s perspective. Because I was interested in the participants’ perspective based on their experiences as members of the generation being studied, I recognized that the individual values, attitudes and beliefs of the participants would be reflected in their responses. Therefore, as the researcher, I was required to interpret the data and understand the participants’ perspective. Merriman (1998) defined interpretive case studies as using descriptive, in-depth, thick descriptions to “develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering” (p. 38). Typically, research in this paradigm is conducted through in-depth interviews or extended observations that produce thick descriptions. The phenomenon in this study cannot be observed; therefore, I conducted in-depth interviews. Because the topic in the study is multifaceted and intertwined, this approach allowed for a deep examination of the
## Generation Effects by Attribute and Author

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Personal Attributes</th>
<th>Societal Attributes</th>
<th>Link to Research Questions</th>
<th>Link to Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Interval</td>
<td><em>stage of life</em> (Mannheim, 1928/1996); <em>birth order</em> (Conley, 2005); <em>family size</em> (Conley, 2005)</td>
<td><em>size</em> (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>attitude toward age groups</em> (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991)</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>2, 3a, 5, 7, 8, 9</td>
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<td>Cohort</td>
<td><em>membership identification</em> (Levine &amp; Cureton, 1998; Mannheim, 1928/1996; Nyhart; Roberts &amp; Lang, 2001; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991)</td>
<td><em>societal perception of group</em> (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991)</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period</td>
<td><em>family situation</em> (Dunham, 1998; Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002; Mentre; Roberts &amp; Lang, 2001); <em>family educational attainment</em> (Dunham, 1998; Guardo, 1982; Levine, 1980; Levine &amp; Cureton, 1998; Pryor, 2007; Roberts &amp; Lang, 2001); <em>race/ethnicity</em> (Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002; Piccardo, 2007); <em>sex</em> (Dunham, 1998; Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002 Roberts &amp; Lang, 2001); <em>economic prosperity</em> (Bourdieu; Pinder); <em>political affiliation</em> (Dromel; Ferrari; Hume); <em>class year</em></td>
<td><em>economic outlook</em> (Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002); <em>political influences</em> (Dromel; Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002; Ferrari; Hume; Mentre; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>war vs. peace time</em> (Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>crisis</em> (Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002; Mentre; Oretga y Gasset; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>global influence</em> (Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002); <em>technological advancement</em> (Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002); <em>historical change</em> (Edmunds &amp; Turner, 2002; Mannheim; Mentre; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991)</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>1, 2, 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td><em>attitudes about family life</em> (Levine &amp; Cureton, 1998; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>sex roles</em> (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>institutions</em> (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>education</em> (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>politics</em> (Hume; Strauss &amp; Howe); <em>religion</em> (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>lifestyle</em>; (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991) <em>and the future</em> (Dunham, 1998; Levine &amp; Cureton, 1998; Roberts &amp; Lang, 2001; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991)</td>
<td><em>attitudes about family life</em> (Cavalli, 2004; Levine &amp; Cureton, 1998; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>sex roles</em> (Cavalli, 2004; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>institutions</em> (Cavalli, 2004; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>education</em> (Cavalli, 2004; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>politics</em> (Cavalli, 2004; Hume; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>religion</em> (Cavalli, 2004; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991); <em>lifestyle</em>; (Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991) <em>and the future</em> (Cavalli; Dunham, 1998; Roberts &amp; Lang, 2001; Strauss &amp; Howe, 1991)</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>1, 2, 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 3e, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 15</td>
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phenomenon. This approach also provided a framework to examine the work of Howe and Strauss (2000) through interaction with members of the generation and would allow me to either substantiate or dispute their findings.

Case Study Inquiry

Case study research is used to answer how or why questions about complex and multilayered phenomenon that cannot be separated from the real-life context (Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Schwandt, 1997; Yin, 1984). More specifically, multiple case studies involve exploring several different cases in order to investigate a phenomenon (Merriman, 1998; Stake, 1995). The strength of the case study approach is that the subsequent descriptions can begin to unravel the complexity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the researcher becomes deeply involved in the cases being studied (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). I began the study with the assumption that by selecting a multiple case approach, more variation in responses could be understood, thus strengthening the interpretation. After completing the fieldwork and analyzing the data, the differences that I anticipated were not apparent. Therefore, the study is considered as one case.

Research Context

This study examined the complexity of using generations, particularly the Millennial description, to portray college students as a unilateral group with similar characteristics. Two institutions in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States were identified in order to uncover the viewpoints of a broader variety of participants. The institutions vary in mission, selectivity, and curricular priorities. The undergraduate student body profile from each of the selected institutions differs in socio-economic status, racial/ethnic background, and academic ability. Liberal Arts University (LAU) is a public, highly residential institution with an
approximate enrollment of 7,600 students. According to the Carnegie Classifications, LAU is a Doctoral Research University. Research University (RU) is public, non-residential institution with an approximate enrollment of 21,000 undergraduates. It is classified as a Comprehensive Doctoral University due to its complexity, mission and medical center (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning [CFAT], 2005). ²

Permission

The research proposal was first submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at LAU. LAU required the proposal to undergo the IRB review process. RU did not require the proposal to be submitted via the IRB because the Office of Research Subjects Protection determined that the campus was not engaged.

At LAU, the initial request for subjects was sent to the Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness office. Concerns were raised about the sample listing at LAU, because I asked for participants to be identified by ethnicity and financial aid eligibility. A list of 200 potential participants from each class, freshman and senior, were obtained without these identifiers.

At RU, the initial request for subjects was sent to the Dean of Students office that coordinated with the Registrar’s office to identify a sample of 200 potential participants from each class, freshman and senior. Because RU would only provide directory information, the sample list was not stratified. Directory information includes general information about a student. For the purpose of this study, the information provided included name, email address, and academic class standing.

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² Throughout the study, the names of the institutions are identified by pseudonyms in order to provide anonymity to the participants.
**Sampling and Participants**

Qualitative inquiry involves a small number of participants in order to understand their experience in an in-depth manner. Because this study focused on Millennial college students, the accessible population consists of all college students (18-24 years of age) enrolled at LAU and RU. A purposeful, criterion-based sampling approach was utilized. Purposeful sampling "selects information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions" (Patton, 2002, p. 230) being researched. Criterion sampling is defined by Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) as "a group of cases that satisfy particular specifications or standards" (p. 636). The criteria for selection included both being a freshman or a senior and traditionally-aged.

I requested and received from each campus a sample of 400 prospective participants, half from both their freshman and senior classes that only included students who were 18-24. Potential subjects were contacted via email outlining the research topic and the requirement for participation (See Appendix B). All informants were notified about how anonymity would be maintained and were asked to return an informed consent form (See Appendix A) as an email attachment to indicate their willingness to participate prior to scheduling an interview. Potential participants were then sent a demographic form (Appendix D) via email, which asked them to identify their sex, race and whether or not they received need-based financial aid. From those who returned the inform consent and the demographic data form, I selected participants purposely in order to have balanced representation based on the criterion for the study.

I interviewed 28 traditionally aged (18-24) undergraduate students at the time of initial communication (see Appendix E). Two participants turned 25 by the date of their
interviews, and one participant had matriculated into a graduate program at the same institution. Sixteen participants from LAU, eight freshmen and eight seniors, and twelve participants, four freshmen and eight seniors, from RU participated. Demographically the participants were diverse with 16 female and 12 male participants, of which, 14 identified themselves as Caucasian, 8 African American, 4 Hispanic, and 2 Asian. Twelve participants indicated that they receive need-based financial aid, while 16 do not. Geographically, the participants are not as diverse. Nineteen participants have always lived in the mid-Atlantic state where the study took place. Of the nine who have lived in other areas of the country, three moved to the mid-Atlantic state within a few years of attending college. Seven of the nine out of state participants attend LAU.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred through two means—a demographic survey, administered prior to selection to participate in the study, and in-depth interview. As part of the interview, participants were asked to bring to the appointment an item or artifact that they believe represents their generation (see Appendix E). The artifact served two primary purposes. First, I hoped it would prompt the participants to begin to think about the generation and conceptualize their thoughts without the influence of the questions that I intended to ask during the interview. Second, I hoped that if the conceptual framework were missing an element essential to the participants understanding about the generation the artifact would provide insight that may have been missed through the interview guide.

Interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes at a mutually convenient time on the campus the participant attended. A day or two prior to the interview, I emailed the participant to confirm the time and location and to again prompt them to bring an artifact to
the interview. Interview times ranged from 35 minutes to two hours depending upon each participant’s responses.

Even though participants were informed of the topic of the study through the informed consent process, the interview began with an overview of the study. I described how anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained and the expected length of each interview. In addition, I asked permission to digitally record the interview; all participants agreed to be audio-recorded. After the introductory information, I began the interview by asking the participant to explain the item they brought and why it is representative of their generation. Two participants forgot to bring an item and we discussed what they would have brought at the end of the interview. I asked, for those who brought an item, if I could photograph it so that an accurate representation was available for data analysis; all complied. For the two participants who did not bring an item I found a representative item that was photographed at a later time. In addition to the insight into the phenomenon I gained, by beginning the interview focused on their perceptions, I believe I was able to build initial rapport with the participant.

The interviews were based on an interview guide (see Appendix C) that I constructed based on the components isolated from the literature and that comprised my conceptual framework (see Table 3.1). I conducted all of the in-depth interviews and asked the questions on the guide. Throughout the interview, I first-level member checked for the participant’s meaning by asking for clarifications about the information they discussed. This check provided me with several advantages including an ability to interact with the participant that afforded the flexibility to explore unexpected areas, the ability to clarify meanings in the moment, and gain perspectives from the participants that were retrospective
and insightful (Darlington & Scott, 2002). This format was advantageous because with case study research, it can be difficult to anticipate every facet that explains the phenomenon for each participant.

After the interview was completed, I transcribed, verbatim, from the audio recording the interview, which was provided to the participant in order to verify that the meaning of the participant’s responses was accurate for second level member checking. Participants were asked to provide any additional clarifications to the information they shared during the interview and were given the opportunity to correct anything that was inaccurate. Only one participant asked to meet again to clarify her responses.

**Data Analysis**

Three types of data were collected and analyzed, demographic (sex, age, race/ethnicity, class year, and socioeconomic status), interview, and artifact data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim before I began the data analysis. This allowed me to become intimately familiar with the data. I then uploaded all of the transcripts into qualitative software, *Ethnograph v6*. Before beginning any analysis, I created deductive codes based on the pre-established categories in the conceptual framework. As I read and coded each transcript, I identified both the deductive or pre-established codes and inductive codes, which are the “salient categories within the data” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 282). Open coding was utilized and codes were established and defined as needed based on the individual responses. As I coded, I created memos that summarized the participants’ responses and recorded thoughts or questions I had about the data in the memos. After the initial coding, I re-read the memos and transcripts by each section of the interview guide and
through mind mapping. Mind mapping is the process of developing a graphic visualization to structure ideas or thoughts focused on a central theme or idea (Mindmapping.com, 2011).

The data were examined both within site and cross-site. I examined the data exploring the patterns that developed across participants’ responses and recorded the information in an Excel spreadsheet. I then analyzed the data to determine if there were differences or similarities by demographic criteria and by institutional type. Because the typical student attending each institution differs, this analysis assisted with exploring whether or not the participants’ background or institutional membership reflected any differences in responses or if patterns could be identified based on this criterion.

Finally, I compared the data to the proposed theory by examining the pre-established categories to determine if the data support the conceptual framework. Even though the literature about college-aged Millennials primarily utilizes Howe and Strauss’ (2000) model to characterize this generation, the purpose of this study was to explore whether different or additional elements related to the conceptualization exist. Therefore, after the initial analysis had been completed, I reviewed the categories to determine whether or not Howe and Strauss’ categorizations were apparent in the data.

**Generalizability**

Qualitative research, in general, is not intended to be generalized to the broader population. Instead, the descriptions are intended to illuminate an understanding of complex situations from multiple perspectives and may inform how the description can be applied in other situations (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). By selecting a case study approach, I hoped to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon and proposed that this study begins to
untangle the complexity of generational components. Therefore, this study only reflects the participants' responses at the time of the study.

Rossman and Rallis (2003) defined the notion of trustworthiness in qualitative research as the integrity, wholeness, and coherence of the study. To meet the standards of trustworthiness, I performed member checks on participant's responses, engaged in reflexive journaling, and developed thick descriptions of the data as a result of the analyses. Through reflexive journaling, I identified questions or considered various viewpoints about the data that helped me as I untangled the complexity in defining a generation. Authenticity is obtained when the researcher employs methods that are genuine and fair. Strategies that were used to establish authenticity included member checking, informed consent, an interview guide approach, and peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is the process by which the researcher speaks in confidence with a trusted and knowledgeable associate with the purpose of sharing ideas or discussing ethical dilemmas. Peer debriefing occurred with trusted colleagues, as needed, as I was contemplating the data. Throughout the study, I met biweekly with colleagues also engaged in research. At these meetings or other spontaneous times we would consult regarding our research or research dilemmas.

**Ethical Safeguards and Considerations**

The protection of human subjects was essential in this study. The study did not commence until permission was granted from Liberal Arts University and Research University Protection of Human Subjects Committees. To ensure that the highest standards were maintained, I followed several basic procedures.

All participants invited to participate in the study received information describing the study and their rights through an informed consent form distributed at the first contact.
through an email from me. In addition, prior to the interview commencing, respondents re-read and re-signed the informed consent form in person, which reinforced the voluntary nature of the study and that they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any time. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions before beginning the interview. In all correspondence with the participants, they were assured of their privacy and confidentiality. I assigned pseudonyms to all of the participants, which are used throughout the data analysis. Digital audio recordings have been kept in my possession, maintained in a secure location, and have only been listened to by me. Transcribed, verbatim interviews were sent to the participant for review and, after any comments have been securely stored. Only the pseudonym of the participant has been used in any public notations related to the study.

An assessment of the risks related to the benefits has been evaluated prior to designing the methods for this study. I concluded that the information sought did not pose any risks. The review by the Protection of Human Subjects Committee provided an external review of the assessment prior to commencing any work on the study. In terms of the benefits, this study will provide a more robust understanding of current college students', Millennials, and their perception about the characteristics and attributes that define their generation.
CHAPTER 4
Heterogeneity and Homogeneity

At the inception of this study, I postulated that four primary categorizations of generations—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—provided a conceptual framework that would assist with understanding traditionally-aged college students, commonly known as Millennials. I suggested that the relationships and interrelationship among these classifications would assist in determining if the depiction of Millennials asserted by Howe and Strauss (2000) were an accurate representation of current college students. I proposed that even though current generational literature primarily situates a generation based within the context of societal attributes missing from the conceptualization were the personal attributes of the individual. Based on the perceptions of 28 college students, my understanding of the influences that contribute to the attitudes and viewpoints of Millennials is more complex than the literature would suggest and the currently conceived generational categories alone do not provide an adequate foundation. Furthermore, I argue here that the individual worldviews and personal values are paramount to understanding the variety of viewpoints within a commonly understood generation, specifically the Millennials. I present a new conceptual framework that suggests spheres of influence, which are based in personal values, and penetrate the preconceived generational definitions of Millennials.

At the onset, I believed because I would recruit participants from two universities with divergent student body profiles that I would be able to compare and contrast the participants based in a multiple case study approach. My assumption was based on the differences in the student body profiles; for example, urban verses suburban, academic rigor, and percentage of students receiving financial aid. Throughout the analysis process, I
grappled with the similarities and differences discovered through the participants' descriptions of their generation and the perspectives that were illuminated based on the personal and societal attributes, as I could not distinguish them based on the campus the participant attended. Therefore, a multiple case study approach is no longer warranted and instead the participants are considered as comprising one case study. Affiliation with a specific group or cohort, such as, academic class standing, gender, socioeconomic status, age or racial background, was also not sufficient to warrant comparisons in the majority of instances, however in instances of relevance group distinctions are delineated. Throughout the chapter, I provide insight into the perceptions of the participants. I focus first on the personal attributes, as I believe these provide a foundation for the viewpoints that the participants hold about the societal attributes. In the next chapter, I will examine the participants understanding of the concept of their generation, scrutinize Howe and Strauss' (2000) portrayal of Millennials, and discuss new ways to conceptualize a generation.

In their depiction of Millennials, Howe and Strauss (2000) have reduced the current college-aged generation to a mere seven characteristics—special, conventional, confident, achieving, team-oriented, sheltered, and pressured—and minimized, by extension, the complexity of any generation. By condensing the description of the Millennials, an informed understanding of the generation has been lost. Therefore, I have elected to view the participants through the lens of heterogeneity and homogeneity. For me, heterogeneity recognizes the variation within the group, while homogeneity acknowledges the similarities. From the onset, the participants have some obvious similarities. They are all college students, are either freshmen or seniors, and have elected to participate in the study. These aspects may be the extent to which the entire group can be consistently described.
Personal Attributes

Personal attributes in this study are defined as the expectations and influences regarding family life, gender roles, education, religion, lifestyle, and the future. I selected these attributes, specifically, because each area is connected to a societal attribute that is cited in the literature. The major difference between the attributes is that the personal attributes are examined based on the individual’s specific viewpoint or situation rather than the prevailing societal influences, upon which the societal attributes are based.

Family Life

Consistently, family and family life provide a foundation for participants that inform their priorities, establish expectations, and guide their future. Even though the family backgrounds of the participants vary, specific ideological underpinnings are woven throughout most aspects of their belief system and will be apparent as the personal attributes are discussed. Participants expressed a high expectation of family support, often unconditional, described future family interactions and expectations that primarily mirrors their current dynamic, that rely on family to create stability, and that have become cognizant of their own priorities based on the positive and negative role modeling of their family.

The expectation of support is realized through unconditional love, acceptance, interaction, and guidance. Unconditional love and acceptance, particularly from parents, are often intertwined and many participants acknowledged the significance of having people who are reliable and are available to assist when needed. Karen eloquently illustrated the role her family contributes to her life.

It's just knowing that there's someone there that loves you. I know, at least in my family, if anything’s wrong, I know that I can go home and be. "Like, I
need help.” And they may not like what I've done. And they may still, you
know, they may take a tough love approach. And you know, [they’d say]
“Yes, of course, we’re going to help you, but we’re not going to, like, do
everything for you.” But I know they are people that I can count on.

Not all participants have experienced this same degree of love and acceptance in their family
situation. Some have observed other families that are less loving. Yet, they still believe that
support should be present. Heather, when she disclosed to her parents that she is gay, was
rejected by her family for a period of time and was kicked out of her home. Her relationship
with her family has since improved. Reflecting on her ideal, she suggested that parents
should be like “cheerleaders or fans” at a sporting event. She described her expectation of
family as, “loving each other and supporting each other . . . no matter what.”

Family interaction and guidance also contributes to the participants’ understanding of
family support. Some participants described the comfort of being able to spend time with
their family members. This attitude is particularly prominent for Maureen who grew up in a
military family and moved frequently. Families that do not prioritize family gatherings are
particularly perplexing to her. Other participants appreciated family participation in
extracurricular activities or parents being involved in their lives. Alluding to the current
depiction of Millennial parents who hover over their children, Bill described his experience
with his family as, “They don’t shoot down my wild ideas immediately. And they always go
to my brother’s soccer games, my cross-country meets, my sister’s ballet recitals, and things
like that. A good level of parental involvement without it being, like, helicopterish.”

Participants recognize the implicit family guidance combined with the freedom to
explore ideas and career paths or their individuality. Robert’s experience during his
chilhood is illustrative of this guidance. At an earlier time in his life, Robert was associating with the wrong crowd and was arrested on a felony charge. He explained that his parents “were backing me up completely even though they know I was messing up so bad.” Through the stability that his parents provided in his home life, he has been able to carve a different path and pursue an education.

Not all participants have experienced the support that they acknowledged as an absolute value for families. Some participants recognized and are disappointed by the strained relationships that are present in their families, while others have been forgiving and prioritize maintaining and cultivating family. Penny, who now inspires her parents and wants to help provide them a better life after she graduates, grew up in the inner city and in a family environment filled with drugs, alcohol, and domestic violence.

In most cases, you want to be like your parents, but in my case, no. So, it was more like, um, looking at them and saying, “Okay, I see the things you’ve done in your life.” And they’ve always, you know, acknowledged that fact. That “We haven’t been the best parents, but we still want you to have the best. We still want you to make your own decisions.” So, I kind of took it upon myself to do that.

The focus on support may also shift depending on the individual’s current circumstances. Kristy grew up asking herself why her family was not more like those depicted in television shows that she watched as a child, such as Family Matters or Full House, and she did not describe her immediate family as unconditionally supportive. As Kristy is a single mother with a toddler, she has redirected her focus toward her daughter.
Even though Kristy’s extended family assists her with raising her child, her priority is her ability to provide love, support, understanding, and encouragement for her daughter.

Support or the lack thereof underscores a key function of family that is important to participants. Their definition, experience, and focus are realized differently. The participants recognized their own understanding and acknowledged differences among their peers. The significance of familial support is paramount, but is experienced differently depending on their individual circumstances. These dynamics also inform their desired future family portrait.

Continued interaction with immediate family is vital for most participants and suggests that the deep connection developed in familial relationships is different than in other relationships cultivated during a person’s lifetime. This perspective is supported as most participants expounded on the importance of future family interactions that are reminiscent of their current situation. Virginia, who grew up in a single-mother household, described the encouragement and care she received from women, specifically from her mother, sister and grandmother. She explained the importance to reciprocate the same level of responsiveness in her future. She stated, “I think just maintaining the relationship[s] and letting them know that I love them. That’s the most important [thing].” Not all participants shared a similar perspective about family, particularly if their relationship with their family has not been ideal. Allen described his childhood as chaotic and believes the physical distance he maintains from his family allows them to preserve positive relations.

Future family interactions are just one aspect of the participants’ perspectives that mirrors and are aligned with the priorities and values that have been predominant throughout their youth. Similar value priorities with which they are already familiar will be further
exemplified as the individual personal attributes are discussed throughout the chapter.

Sharon, for example, desires to get married, have at least two children, be prosperous, and be financially stable. She stated, "Just seeing my mom do those types of things. . . . She's awesome. . . . I want to be, I'm not saying that I want to be like her, but I want to be as good as her. . . . [She] is more of a driving force" for me. Sharon explained that these goals are important because of her admiration for her mother. Her perspective about family is indicative of other participants who described futures that reflect the ideals of their current family background.

One notable distinction about the value of family was illuminated through the African American participants' descriptions. They conveyed through their depictions an elevated and emphasized essence and expressed a higher level of significance about the importance of family. Wade, for example, stated, "Family first. For the simple fact that they tell you, you're leaving a legacy behind." Wade firmly believes that his parents instilled in him the foundation and structure for a successful life. He further discussed the stories that his deceased grandmother and uncle have left behind that are central to his family's history and expounded on the significance of their familial interactions. African Americans were the only participants to explain a prioritization of family before other individuals or competing factors and referenced family heritage as vital. These viewpoints seem to infer that family may be a consistent source of stability in their life. Lewis, for example, specified that spending time, honoring his commitments and elevating his family for the best outcome were priorities. He stated that he should never consider himself before his family. Lewis explained that he would be able to honor his family commitments by duplicating the values instilled by his parents and creating "moments" of stability and happiness similar to the
environment his parents created for their family. For Lewis, these “moments” would signify that he was achieving this goal.

The desire for stability is more wide-ranging than for just a subsection of the participants. Several participants explained the need for consistency in their life. Chad illustrated this viewpoint from a cross-generational perspective. His parents divorced when he was younger and he experienced periods of uncertainty that have affected his view of family. As he described his ideal future, he indicated, if he has a family, he wants to be confident that he can provide for them. Although not always the case during his youth, the family value of creating stability has resonated with him. He explained:

When it comes to family, the structure, the values, the importance of it [for] me, is that I place a huge importance on maintaining stability and a livelihood for the children. I feel like providing for the children has always been the main goal of every parent in every generation in my family.

Chad’s aspiration for family stability has germinated from both the family value that has been internalized and periods of insecurity during his childhood.

More often than not, positive role modeling in families informed the priorities that participants desire in their future. Yet, negative role modeling was just as powerful. Ella, who feels very connected to her family and believes that she can emulate her parents, has observed consequences regarding some of her parents’ life decisions. She is motivated to pursue a divergent path. Obtaining an education and living a healthy lifestyle is of particular prominence. Ella, who receives need-based financial aid, believes that her family has experienced repercussions, such as lower income levels and fewer opportunities for career changes, from neither of her parents having completed their college degrees. Although
earning a high income is not her priority, she is motivated to pursue education and aspires to earn a doctoral degree one day. Furthermore, Ella recently began making healthier life choices after reflecting on her parents' lifestyle. She stated:

Both of my parents are obese, and on top of that, my mom smokes. So, you know, I see a lot of health problems that come from, number one, her smoking. And number two, her obesity on top of that. And then, also from my dad being obese too. And I thought, you know, I don't want to be like that.

Clearly, Ella has elected to reject elements that are present in her family and pursue a different direction.

Thus, family and family life contribute prominently in the experiences of the participants, even though meaningful differences emerge from person to person. Because these perspectives cannot be stripped from the participants' experiences, their values, priorities and expectations influenced by family dynamics will permeate other aspects of the personal attribute areas and serve as the lens through which members of any generation view the world.

**Gender Roles**

Two primary descriptors emerged related to gender roles—equality and fluidity—which are intertwined. The majority of participants, both male and female, explained that men and women are equal in interpersonal relationships, social situations and the opportunities available. To them, the roles are no longer strictly defined by sex and are flexible according to the circumstances. Participants who diverged from the trajectory of traditional gender roles described a pressure to conform. Although the participants described
gender roles as equal and fluid, individual ideals do not seem to match and were exceedingly connected to traditional gender roles. Furthermore, their perspectives were predisposed toward their current familial structure or a romanticized nuclear family structure, which creates a conflict and dissonance between their espoused viewpoint and their projected futures.

The equality and fluidity described in male-female relationships focused on equal access to life opportunities, roles that are defined based on individual strengths and skills rather than sex, interchangeable roles in families, or as a continuum of gender traits for individuals. Participants consistently suggested that equality exists within male-female relationships. They believe they are able to pursue any option in life even if members of one sex previously held the role. Therefore, they believe that everyone has equal access to life pursuits and are not limited by their sex. Karen, for example, described the difficulty she had writing paper for a class assignment about how gender roles have shaped her. She stated, “I had a lot of trouble because I couldn’t think of a specific thing where I was told, ‘No, you can’t do this because you are a girl or you have to do this because you’re a girl.’” Participants concluded that regardless of his or her sex everyone should receive equal treatment.

Participants indicated that gender roles should not be determined solely based on a person’s biological sex, but rather they should be flexible and depend on the particular interpersonal relationship, individual, or situation. A one-size fit all approach was not preferred, and individuals in a relationship were expected to define the roles and contribute based on their individual strengths rather than any predictable roles. Lewis illustrated this viewpoint as he described his perspective about the interactions between men and women.
He stated, "I don't think there's anything wrong with males doing females jobs and vice versa. I feel like it depends on the relationship. . . . The gender roles will play out how they need to." Yet, Lewis specifies male and female jobs in his statement, which implies that gender roles may not be as undefined as he suggests.

Even though participants consistently described interpersonal relationships in terms of equality, a few men cited physiological differences as an exception and stipulated that modifications should not be made in professions with a physical requirement, such as firefighter or soldier. Participants, who expressed concern about physical limitations, focused their criticism on the ability of the person to respond specifically in emergency situations. These men felt that if the qualification requirements for women were lowered because of their biological physical differences, then in conditions that require a higher degree of physical strength or endurance, the women would not be able to perform to the standard needed. Therefore, the participants believe that individuals might be put in undue jeopardy because of the modified qualifications; a risk they were not willing to take. Wayne, for example, stated, "Tests should be equal. A woman firefighter shouldn't have to do less push-ups to become a firefighter. I'm in a burning building. I'm dying. A 110 pound woman is not going to lift me out." Consistently, these participants only described altered qualification standards for women and did not propose that men would require different criteria in any circumstance.

Divergent from the participants who view gender roles as equal and fluid also are those who believe the roles should be or are clearly defined. Typically, these participants identified as conservative in most aspects of their values. Karl, for example, perceives gender roles as established and believes that people should not deviate from them. He stated,
“Men and women offer different things. . . . I think girls should be taught how to be girls. Um, boys should be taught how to be boys.” At the other end of the spectrum, women who have elected to prioritize a career path instead of focusing on raising a family believe that society does not support their decisions and expects women to do it all. Virginia, for example, described this conflict and pressure.

In the culture that we live in, it’s not like you go to college to find a husband. But more like. . . . Guys go to college to get their career. Girls go to college to get a career and find a husband. It’s kind of a double load. And I feel that follows throughout your life in modern womanhood. It’s like you’re expected to maintain your career and family, especially in modern American woman life.

Furthermore, Virginia suggested that, as a woman, it is acceptable to not strive to be both career and family focused; a viewpoint not expressed by many.

The pressure to conform is also experienced by participants who wish to pursue more traditional roles. Several female participants discussed their desire to be stay-at-home mothers in the future and experienced having their mom at home and not working during their youth. Although some articulated being a stay-at-home mom as a priority, they perceived that societal norms might be in conflict. Karl, for example, stated, “I feel like these days . . . it’s easy for women to feel like they are selling out by being a stay-at-home mother.” Bill also suggested that women who want to take care of children and the home are repressed by society, while others thought they might be looked down upon for electing this path.
Often participants described changing patterns particularly in family responsibilities with fathers cooking and cleaning more and women contributing financially. Some male participants indicated they were open to serving as the primary caregiver, but predicated the concession on the woman is the ability to contribute more financially. Bill, for example, reflected about what it means for motherhood as more women work. He stated:

It means that fathers can be mothers now. . . . Fathers can step in and fill that role. A woman is in a high-powered job, you know, making $200,000 a year. . . . The male is a high school teacher or something like that. They have a lot of work obviously, but not, like, you know, not like a high-powered $200,000’s a year.

Although Bill indicates that the roles can be interchanged, implied in his description is a hierarchy related to both earning potential and the value assigned to the different professions and family roles.

Participants indicated that not all people should have to conform to traits that are traditionally associated with a specific sex. Therefore, they should have the ability to pick and choose any role that they identify with, without penalty, and be accepted regardless of sex or sexuality. Furthermore, in some situations the roles have to be filled by the opposite gender out of necessity. Heather, who is gay, described her perspective and applied it to herself and single parent households.

I think the most general expectation is that women are supposed to be feminine and men are supposed to be masculine. But it's not that cut and dry. It's not black and white like that. I think gender is a much more fluid thing.
That you can't just say, I am feminine. It's not like a dot. It's more like a spectrum type thing.

Although Heather prioritized gender roles based on a continuum, some participants, specifically from dual parent households, described traditional gender roles related to the function performed. Women were described as nurturers, while men were depicted as leaders or the strength in the family. Ella explained, “My dad seems to be more of the, like, physical support. You know, like the pat on the back... My mom seems to be more the emotional support.”

Even though many of the participants indicated that equality in relationships and fluidity in these roles has been achieved in American society, their understanding of the expectations and the roles assigned to men and women, in most cases and in particular dual parent households, appear to revert back to the traditional roles. This perspective is particularly apparent as the participants described their future expectations. Important to note is that the majority of participants were raised in a traditional nuclear family environment and were mindful that this is not the norm in society. However, participants were not cognizant of the incongruence in their perspectives and were unfettered by their desire to follow traditional gender roles. Andrew, who is gay, described his understanding of gender roles in current American society as, “Men don’t always have to be strong. Women don’t always have to be, they can switch back and forth. There’s no real set gender role anymore.” Yet, when Andrew explained what is important to him in his future, he stated, “The ideal of finding a spouse, settling down for the career. I guess, having kids, that happy lifestyle idea... somewhat like my parents’ life, just seeing them and what they been doing, kind of, a similar idea.” It appears that their connection to traditional gender roles relates to
their family experience and that they are unable to envision a future that is not entrenched in the environment that they have always known.

Regardless of the perspective that participants shared, their prevailing viewpoint was often linked to family values. Pat, physiologically a woman, but who self-identifies as a transgender man, discussed the influence of his mother during his youth and connects this perspective to how he currently views gender. He explained that he was raised as a boy because his mother rejected conformity.

The things that my mother, when she was growing up in the 70’s and 80’s, saw as a dysfunction of our society, that boys were raised to be independent and strong and self-sufficient, and, um, assertive. And that women were generally raised to be, ah, receptive, and, and put their goals underneath other people’s, be more altruistic and giving, etc. And she thought the better things to teach children were the, so-called, masculine traits. So, um, they were not necessarily taught as male traits, but taught as strong values.

Pat does not subscribe to the traditional roles assigned to men and women. Although Pat has been guided by a philosophical family value, for others the ideals are connected to other family priorities and intertwined. Cassandra described her family and herself as having a strong Christian faith and associates her perspective about gender based on religious teachings. She stated, “God is very specific about what he’s talking about in the Bible. About who’s in charge of what. But my family holds that very true as well. So we try to stick by that.” Because Christianity is the primary foundation for Cassandra and her family, her viewpoint about gender roles is simultaneously grounded both in religion and family values that cannot be separated.
As with family and family life, negative family relationships appear to have been a stimulus for some participants’ current perceptions about gender and their ability to develop positive relationships. African American women, in particular, who were raised in single-mother homes, acknowledged the difficulties they have experienced due to the lack of male role models in their lives. The absence has affected their ability to understand another perspective. Each of these participants described conflicts they have experienced with male relationships. Penny, for example, illustrated this perspective when she stated, “It’s really important—I don’t care if you’re a daughter or a son—to have a good relationship with your dad or to have some type of male role model. . . . I think it would have improved my discernment for guys.”

Even though participants specified that gender roles have become equal and fluid, the reality of their vision either reflects more traditional roles for men and women or is grounded in the values to which they have been accustomed throughout their lives. Family background, in particular, parents, contribute considerably to the perspectives of the participants. However, the participants are conflicted in their gender role definitions. They are able to envision social, interpersonal and some career aspirations without boundaries, but revert to traditional roles as they describe their lifestyle and future. Women who foresee a future that either conforms to traditional female roles and those who embrace the opportunities available due to equality both felt pressured by societal norms. The degree to which equality is realized may not have progressed as far as the participants verbalized based on the incongruence in their imagined future. Furthermore, participants primarily discussed gender roles related to male-female relationships and often neglected to discuss gender in relation to career or same sex relationships.
Education

Overwhelmingly and not surprisingly, participants explained that obtaining an education is important to them and necessary for their future. They indicated that an education, particularly at the collegiate level, provides knowledge and power that in turn stimulates social mobility and financial security, both of which are essential to attaining the lifestyle they desire. Participants have been driven to increase their education for these purposes, but also based on their love of learning. Family, racial background and in some instances, educators inspired participants to learn.

An advanced education signifies opportunity, options, and the ability to influence the individuals’ destiny. With a college degree, participants implied that they would be able to accomplish their future goals more easily. Rashi, for example, believes that an education is not required of everyone and individuals can achieve success without it, but she stated, “Education is always better, ah, to get you further in life.” In general, the participants perceived that education is valued in American society and therefore has meaning.

Through direct experiences, participants have discovered the potential opportunities that become available through education. Opportunities either affect social mobility or maintain or increase the financial security that they have experienced or desire in their future. Karl, for example, described education as “a great equalizer” and believes that social inequality can be overcome through educational attainment. He reflected on his family’s success and higher socioeconomic status due to his parents’ increased education. As a young child, Karl’s family lived in a poor area of their city. Since then, his parents have both obtained college degrees and their income has increased. He distinguished among the different options available for the older and younger children in his family that resulted from
the economic shift that occurred after his parents augmented their education. Although Karl experienced a change in socioeconomic status during his childhood because of his parents’ additional education, others only imagine the possibility of an improved life. Martha, who receives need-based financial aid and aspires to attend medical school, has had the message of an elevated and improved life through education reinforced by her mother throughout her childhood. For her, education is “the most important thing . . . because no one can take that away from you. And once you get an education, you can go very far in life.” Related to the possibilities that education is perceived to provide, some participants equated education with preventing difficulties in their future. Heather, for example, stated, “I definitely think now, if you don’t have a college degree, you’re going to struggle just because you’re at an immediate disadvantage.”

Participants are motivated to further their education by their curiosity, internal drive and ambition, a desire to learn about different people, or the acquisition of new ideas and concepts. Sharon, for example, described her passion for learning and acquiring knowledge. She stated:

I feel like you have to educate yourself. . . . If you don’t step outside the box, yourself, try and learn this concept or that concept. . . . Where are you going to go in life? . . . It’s important to learn new things every day. . . . It’s important to listen to people, um, to give and take from them. . . . I almost feel like you’re not existent [sic] if you don’t do that. . . . You should be absorbing everything you can. . . . I feel like education is key, key to life. If you’re not learning, what’s your purpose?
Most participants expressed a similar enthusiastic viewpoint about continued education, explaining that their lives might stagnate and they would be unfulfilled without ongoing learning. This elevated sense about learning and education is important to acknowledge. Participants are aware that their options in American society would most likely be stymied without an advanced education, and therefore, they would be limited in their future opportunities and their ability to achieve the life they envision.

Furthermore, the pursuit of new information and knowledge is appreciated for reasons beyond the completion of a degree. The internal rewards are equally important to the participants. The concepts of knowledge and learning are connected for most of the participants. Some participants described possessing a love of learning, while others seek knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge, both formal and informal, is perceived to provide a foundation for both practical purposes and basic social interactions in the world. Robert who recently changed his major from art to philosophy and religious studies, for example, stated, “Wisdom is something I think is very, very valuable, and it’s, it’s why I have that strive for knowledge now.” Furthermore, Virginia described her out of classroom experiences as “teaching me how to be a person.”

Moreover, knowledge is connected to power, particularly for African American women. Martha, for example, believes that through her education she will be able to improve her status in society and feels motivated by her success in college. She stated, “[Education is] very powerful. To know that you master all of these things and learned all of this stuff . . . it’s good for you in the outcome.” Meanwhile, Kristy, who aspires to work in the health field and believes that she will continue to learn throughout her life, pronounced that she is “empowered by knowledge” and connects her current coursework with her future
career. Several participants, such as Kristy and Martha, exude self-confidence because of their educational success and their belief that the knowledge they have gained through their advanced education will provide them the resources or influence to cultivate their future career pursuits. Their perception that knowledge, education, and on-going learning may mitigate other societal forces such as socioeconomic status or racial background was prevalent, and they are confident they will be able to achieve the lifestyle they desire.

Although most participants believe education contributes to individuals positively, some expressed concern in two areas—the societal expectation, necessity, and value of a college degree, and the relevance of education. Several participants compared a Bachelor's degree, in contemporary society, as equivalent to a high school diploma in prior years and suggested that soon a master's degree would become the new standard. Colin, in particular, described the juxtaposition that this demand creates. He believes that there is a delicate balance in achieving the correct amount of education. He stated, "Education is becoming this strange thing that you need, but you can't have too much of it." Furthermore, some participants, primarily men, expressed concern that a college degree has become a prerequisite in life and that people who choose a different path are not highly valued in society. Sam described a college degree as "compulsory" and "the necessary step after high school" because obtaining a college degree was the expectation espoused by teachers and guidance counselors in order to have "legitimate" standing in American society. For Sam, college is not for everyone. He believes that individuals can only reap what they sow in that environment, and, in reality, college may just delay entering adulthood rather than being a meaningful endeavor.
Participants who were dissatisfied with the primacy college education has taken, articulated a desire for other options to be available, such as pursuing a trade or attending an apprenticeship or vocational school. However, they are concerned that these options are valued less by society. For them, the types of jobs that might be obtained through an alternative route may have lower financial earning potential, less prestige, and limit future life and career options associated with them in society.

Some participants were aware of the broader implications of education related to its applicability. Lewis proposed that for African Americans and for individuals from lower socioeconomic status, education is not relevant to these individuals because education is taught from the perspective of privilege. Lewis specifically suggested that education “should reflect the day, should reflect the times, should reflect the community” and currently does not. Instead, it caters to either the majority or those with power and influence. Furthermore, he believes that Black men are less represented in higher education because their education is not relevant to them rather than due to their level of intelligence. He explained:

I feel like if you start a child off and its first conception of itself is as a slave.
I think that something is very wrong with that to me; versus you start another child off and their first conception of themselves is a Roman Emperor. I feel like that has an effect on people too. And um, I think that. That made education. That made a relevant education important.

Although many of the participants from underrepresented racial backgrounds perceived an education as a means to provide opportunities and erase societal barriers, some, like Lewis, are aware of the societal prejudices that still exist. Other participants suggest that due to the streamlined nature of education it is not adaptable to the varying abilities of people and does
not meet the requirements of all, particularly those at the extremes including gifted students or those with special needs. Even though education was touted as an "equalizer" that provides social mobility opportunities, some participants recognize limitations of education.

Participants cited three influences on their perspective about education—family values, racial background, and caring educators. Family, specifically parents, emerged as the most significant influence as the participants revealed their perspectives about education. Participants indicated that their families conveyed messages about the importance of an education and often advised that success is equated with the completion of an advanced degree. Furthermore, families expected, encouraged and often provided financial support for the participant to attend college. Craig, for example, shared that everyone in his family, parents and siblings alike have attended college and as a result, he did not expect a different path for himself.

The value about the importance of an education was communicated to the participant early in their life. Family values and racial background were often discussed simultaneously, particularly for Indian Asian or African American participants. Indu, for example, described her Asian culture as emphasizing education and following that tradition; her family conveyed those expectations. Because of the importance Indu’s family stressed about education, the expectation of a college degree is non-negotiable. Furthermore, African American participants specified that through education social mobility is positively affected or they are able to mitigate discrimination. Karen, who does not receive financial aid, described the consistent message from her father as, "Because we are disadvantaged . . . you need to take these opportunities and do what you can with them and excel."
Educators also contributed to the perspective of some participants. Lydia, for example, recalled teachers who went above and beyond to encourage and challenge her in elementary school. She attributes these moments as important in her pursuit of education and her desire for life-long learning.

Unquestionably, participants in this study are likely to be more inclined to value education than perhaps their peers who are not enrolled in a college or university. The participants value education because of internal motivation, the possibility of maintaining or enhancing their lives, and the emphasis communicated to them throughout their lives. Throughout their descriptions, family, race and educators contribute to their perception about education.

**Religion**

Viewpoints about religion were delineated in two distinct ways—faith and non-faith based. Participants’ perceptions about religion spanned from an individual who puts God before family, those whose perspectives are still evolving, and at the other end, an atheist. Participants connected religion to a feeling of support and also believe that religion contributes to the development of moral standards and values, which sometimes was associated with an individual’s sense of purpose. Faith, belief and the recognition of a higher power were prominent in the descriptions about religion and spirituality. Families, in general, and parents, in particular, were credited with participants’ current understanding and connection with religion and their future involvement. Not all participants were able to clearly describe their conception of religion as it is still evolving, and they believe that further exploration is required. Furthermore, participants’ perceptions about religion were clustered based on some demographic similarities, which will be discussed further.
**Faith-Based.** Participants from a faith-based perspective are further distinguished as either religious or spiritual although some commonalities exist between the two groups, such as a spiritual connection and the belief in a higher power. Religious individuals were raised in a formal and organized religious tradition and continue to participate in that religion. These participants explained that the church community and other members of the church provide comfort and assistance that is critical. The sense of belonging to these individuals is key to their identity with their religion. In addition, they emphasized the significance of maintaining or cultivating their ongoing relationship with God. These priorities are primarily associated with women participants and those from non-Caucasian backgrounds. Kristy, for example, explained:

> I wanted to be there [in church], and that mattered more than me just sitting in church. . . . Just being there because somebody wanted me to be there. . . . I think that's more important than anything else . . . just knowing that He's [God] always there for you . . . no matter what.

Spiritual individuals have and are exploring various religious traditions and select aspects from each that resonate with them. This characteristic, more than any other, is central to their spirituality. Through this journey, which for many, continues, they are developing their perspective about religion. For them, participation in a particular organized religious community is not important or necessary. Wade, for example, described himself as non-denominational, and stipulated that through discussions with Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims he has developed his faith.

However, some spiritual individuals are disenchanted with institutionalized religion. For some, it conjures visions of inflexibility, doubt and skepticism. For them, connections to
particular self-selected ideals chosen from among a variety of perspectives allow the development of an eclectic viewpoint about religion. These participants often are still in the process of questioning their beliefs and their perspective about religion is evolving. Lewis, for example, stated, "[Religion] should offer its teachings and let people themselves interpret those teachings. It should offer its practices and let people interpret those practices and benefit from those practices."

Faith-based individuals explained that religion served as a source of support for people, in general. Support was described as providing comfort, security, guidance or acceptance, particularly during difficult times or hardships. Pat, who has had negative experiences with the local church community and has chosen a Pagan belief system, described religion as, "the thing that you can turn to in times of need or trouble . . . a support system as much as your family is or your community is." Participants described two varying ways that support may occur. Some participants suggest that the people in their religious community provide a "safe haven" that reinforces their choices and decisions; while others acknowledge the dynamism of knowing that someone is available on whom they could rely to assist them, specifically during challenging times. Penny, who sings in a Christian campus choir, describes the support she has discovered through her involvement with this group. She states, "I feel comfortable and know that no matter what's going on that week . . . It's going to transfer my mind . . . get me through the rest of the week . . . You can get with the group of people . . . talk about different things you are going through." Wayne, who describes himself as agnostic, but still wants to believe an afterlife exists, stated, "For a lot of people, religion is important especially, you know, when they get sick or if they just fall on hard
times. It becomes so important.” Non-Caucasian participants and individuals from lower socioeconomic status were more likely to articulate this viewpoint.

In addition to support, participants, who identified as faith-based, credited their religion or spirituality with developing their moral standards and values. The teachings of their particular religious codes establish boundaries, and therefore provide a structure to follow. Although participants identified their religion or spirituality as the source for their morals and values, family influence cannot be separated and will be described later. As described by the participants, values are internal and are less flexible, and moral standards are developed through interactions with external situations, and ultimately are chosen behaviors based on the underpinnings of their faith. Participants from higher socioeconomic status indicated that their moral standards are connected to their faith. Lori, for example, was raised in the Jewish tradition. She identifies her religion as contributing to her cultural identity and states, “It [religion] sets, at least for me, it sets my moral standards.” Non-Caucasian participants denoted their values as intertwined with their faith. Sharon, a Christian, believes that her religion, purpose and values are interwoven and portrays religion as the “purpose that God has . . . set before us.” Even though participants rely on their religion or spirituality as the source of guidance, the major difference between values and moral standards for these participants is the notion of choice and whether the ideal is internally or externally conceived.

Participants, who describe themselves as faith-based, consistently refer to belief and faith while acknowledging that a higher power exists. Even though the terms faith and belief were used interchangeably, slight distinctions were made between the two. Faith refers to their adherence to the underlying tenets of their religious tradition. Ella, for example, has
reaffirmed her commitment to her religion by attending church regularly and “really pursuing my faith and not questioning my faith.” Belief refers to the values that the individual has collected and prioritized. Heather acknowledges that her “own little spiritual belief” is grounded in karma and the Golden Rule rather than a God. Furthermore, for Karl, a Mormon, faith and belief are intertwined. He describes the evolution of religion in his life. “My own interactions with people in different religions and within my own faith, um, and my own, just, personal beliefs and interaction with my own spirituality.”

The acknowledgement, trust and reliance in a higher power were noteworthy for faith-based participants. Heather, for example, stated, “I feel like you have to believe in something... I feel that there is some sort of, like higher power.” For some participants, specifically spiritual individuals like Heather, the higher power described is intangible, whereas for religious participants, the higher power is associated with a God. In addition, religious participants indicated that it is vital to maintain and cultivate their relationship with God. Penny, for example, relies on her Bible, God and praying during difficult times, and therefore, “I try my best to maintain my relationship with God.”

**Non-Faith Based.** Non-faith based participants did not ascribe to any particular facet of religion nor were they spiritual even though most have participated and understand the traditions of at least one organized religion. Their perspectives sometimes overlap with spiritual individuals, but most of the non-faith based participants do not depend on any religious teachings. Most were distrustful of organized religion. Colin, for example, stated, “I don’t really do the whole religion thing.” He specifically described religion as weird, strange, and scary particularly as he discussed extreme religious groups.
Most non-faith based participants, particularly men, and some who ascribed to spirituality expressed concern about organized religion, specifically the divisiveness and rigidity that has developed in recent years. Bill, for example, does not believe in the supernatural. He does not understand the extreme viewpoints, such as groups that justify killing or fighting based on religion. Instead, he believes that religion should be something that is peaceful which he does not currently observe. He illustrated this conflict as he stated, “It doesn’t seem like that should be used to justify killing other people or, you know, [it] is very weird to me. It’s like you aren’t in my club. We will ostracize you now.”

Non-faith based individuals were content with their decision to reject organized religion and the belief in the unknown. The support that faith-based individuals described was not needed by the non-faith based participants. Furthermore, their difficulty with espoused religious teachings, often the extremist viewpoints, confirms their choice to reject religion.

Influences. Families, chiefly parents, are credited with influencing participants’ perspectives regarding religion. The effect for Karen is materialized through her desire to find a husband with Christian values similar to those her parents instilled in her. For Cassandra, the evidence is robust. She equates the majority of her personal attitudes and beliefs to three interwoven influences—being raised in a Christian household, her parents, and her religion. Previously noted, Cassandra’s views about gender have been developed based upon this foundation, and she stipulates that in her lifestyle her ability to “uphold the morals of the Bible” and to live conservatively is fundamental. Although Cassandra’s viewpoint about religion is expressed more intensely than others, the interconnected perspective is apparent throughout the descriptions.
Non-faith based participants similarly recognized their parents as significant in their understanding. Indu, an atheist, indicated that her parents are from mixed religious backgrounds, Hindu and Christian. Even though her parents taught her about religion, they did not advocate for any particular perspective. Indu believes her parents' flexibility gave her the freedom to choose her path. For some participants, extended families are more prominent influences related to their viewpoint regarding religion. Martha, for example, stated, "My grandma stressed it a lot"—more so than her mother. Strikingly, extended family was credited more frequently than any other personal attribute area as a source of influence.

Participants approached religion from distinctly different perspectives, although some similarities were apparent based on demographic characteristics, such as gender or racial background. Even though participants' connection to or understanding of religion or spirituality may differ, a common thread throughout their descriptions included the support provided and the foundation religion offered for moral and value development. Families provide the basis for religious viewpoints although full development, for some, is still evolving.

**Lifestyle and the Future**

Participants' discussion about key aspects in their lifestyle and future often overlapped and therefore, these personal attribute areas are discussed in tandem. Priorities for the participants' are primarily related to the interpersonal, economic, and personal aspects of their lives. The interpersonal aspect includes their relationships with family and friends, and the creation of a family. Economic topics are comprised of monetary stability, careers and salary, and ongoing education. Focal points for the participants' personal life include
finding meaning, achieving happiness, living healthily, finding personal balance, and independent living. Family is the primary influence although friends and religion contribute to the participants’ conceptualizations. Even though similarities exist related to participants’ lifestyle and future, the priorities emerged differently based on demographic characteristics for some issues.

**Interpersonal.** Participants consistently stipulated that ongoing interpersonal relationships with their family members are a high priority. More seniors, participants from higher socioeconomic status, men, or participants from Research University specified that continued family involvement is critical. Even though Bill is not concerned that he will remain close to his family, his viewpoint is illustrative of the importance of maintaining family interactions. He stated, “I’d like to stay in contact with my family” specifically around the holidays and during other momentous events. Because participants have emphasized the significance of family and the unconditional support they have received from family throughout all aspects of the personal attributes, attention to these relationships is expected. Furthermore, the participants’ desire to create their own family corresponds with these future expectations. Karl, who plans to marry his fiancé after graduation, stated, “I would like to still be married . . . [and] have children . . . I would like to have a happy home life.”

Maintaining current and developing new friendships were also important to the participants. Seniors, specifically Caucasians from higher socioeconomic status, value meaningful friendships, particularly the social component this provides in their lives. Heather, for example, emphasized the importance of being “surrounded by people I love and care about. Good friends. Good people.” For some, their friendships provide another means
for participants to reinforce their current values or provide motivation to explore a different aspect of life. Wayne, for example, explicitly described wanting a life that is independent and would allow him freedom, which absolves him of the responsibilities that are indicative of adulthood. He believes that his family has encouraged him in this way. Furthermore, friends who have elected not to conform to traditional societal expectations, such as working a 9-5 job, inspire him. Family, specifically, and friends, in general, serve as the basis for the social foundation for the participants’ future. These relationships appear to function as the base for community, support and inspiration.

**Economic.** Even though relationships are important, the ability to establish solid financial standing is key to the participants’ envisioned futures. They concentrated on three means of achieving this goal—careers and salary, continued education, and monetary stability. In turn, participants foresee a stable, comfortable and happy life, all three of which were often discussed synchronously. Participants emphasized finding a job as predominant and typically did not focus on a career path. Seniors expressed more immediate concern due to the current economic climate; while freshmen were optimistic that by the time they graduate securing a job would become easier. Bill, a senior, stated, “I want to have a nice solid job. I want job stability.”

The majority of participants recognize that the completion of their college degree does not automatically promise employment anymore. This potential conundrum concerns them. Some have elected to defer employment by furthering their education. Karen, specifically, reflected that the job market has been difficult for the last few years and is unsure what her future holds. Even though she realizes that she can only remain dependent on her parents for a limited amount of time, Karen is uncertain how she will simultaneously
work and go to graduate school. Furthermore, before the seniors entered college and the economy plummeted, they believed that by completing their Bachelor’s degree they would have sufficient credentials to secure a job. Now, they are unable to rely on this belief and appear to be disappointed by this change.

In terms of their financial future, the participants focused more on financial stability than prosperity. Those, primarily seniors and men from Liberal Arts University, who focused on financial stability, appear to have realistic goals related to their earning potential. Furthermore, they explained that that their objective financially is to live comfortably, which entails being able to afford the lifestyle they desire, provide for their future family or contribute to their parents’ life in the future. In addition to providing for her own family, Penny stipulated that she wants to “take care of my parents. I don’t want them to worry about anything.” Although the specific intentions of the participants varied, common throughout their descriptions was the ability to incorporate leisure activities and ensure a safeguard for emergency situations. Indu, specifically, explained that being successful and financially stable is a priority. She stated, “I’d like to be not only financially secure, but just, like, have a buffer. So, I don’t ever have to worry.”

Even though, financial stability was the focal point, the dream of becoming rich is a recurring aspiration. Participants who focused on monetary prosperity recognized that their goals might be more dream or fantasy. Although Colin ultimately wants his life to be comfortable and not overly indulgent, he illustrated this viewpoint. “If I could have tons of money, and you know. Live on yachts and fly planes around places. Sure I would. Who the fuck wouldn’t?”
Primarily, participants are optimistic about their ability to achieve their financial goals and did not envision difficulty in this aspect of their life. Penny recognizes that achieving a financially secure and comfortable life might not occur automatically. She has lived through difficult financial circumstances and has insight that was not apparent with most other participants. She described her future in this way.

Just being comfortable, you know. Being able to be smart about your money.

And like, being able to establish something so you can leave something behind. You're going to struggle sometimes. You're going to stress sometimes. But when an emergency comes, it shouldn't be, like, the end of the world. So, like, lifestyle is like being, being comfortable at some point . . . putting yourself in a position where you can actually live comfortably.

Penny understands that the ideal financial circumstances do not simply occur and participants recognize that the job market and economic climate in America is currently challenging. However, they only indicated that their ability to secure a job would be affected and disregarded any other aspect of their lives. This dissonance is striking and suggests that the participants might believe that their success will inevitably occur and what they idealize is in fact their perceived reality.

**Personal.** The participants prioritized seeking a meaningful life, a healthy lifestyle, personal balance, and independence. Each of these elements ultimately contributes to their vision of a happy and satisfying life. Caucasians and seniors articulated the desire for a meaningful life more often than others. For some, meaningfulness was linked to the jobs they envision in their future. Lydia, for example, would like to enter the education field and either become a teacher or work with a connected government agency. She described
working for a non-profit one summer. She was able to implement changes during her brief employment, and therefore, she is motivated to pursue a career path that will allow her to affect the field of education. Others explained that they did not want to become a burden on society or desired to help others. Karl revealed that at one time earlier in his life he felt that he “was burdening somebody else because of mistakes he had made. Because of selfish choices I had made.” Furthermore, he stated, “I never want to feel that again . . . so that I can contribute” and not impose on others again. Additionally, participants described a meaningful life as one that allows them to pursue worthwhile passions, such as sustainability. Lori explained that she wants to work in the environmental field because “I want to have an impact. I want to help save the world.”

The idea of living a healthy lifestyle was primarily defined as eating well, exercising, and caring for the person’s body, although mental health was also discussed. Women from Liberal Arts University and participants from lower socioeconomic status from Research University emphasized a healthy life as a priority more often. For some, the aspiration of a healthy life is internally determined. They make health conscious choices because they believe their body responds positively, know that they made a good decision, and are aware of the ramifications of poor choices. Allen, for example, works in a profession that is physically demanding and his body is reacting negatively to the stress and strain. He envisions a future that will allow him to be “in tune with my body.” For a few, they are motivated because of external factors and motivated by societal or peer pressure. Diane believes that society and her friends expect her to maintain a certain image, which can only be achieved through a healthy lifestyle. She explained that because of her healthy choices her “self-confidence” improves. Participants that include mental health as a component of a
healthy life focus on intellectual stimulation and opportunities for rejuvenating their inner self through reflection or engagement in activities that contribute to a balanced life.

Seniors and participants from higher socioeconomic status were more likely to prioritize creating a life in balance. Seniors, of course, are embarking on a new chapter in their lives, and therefore, they may be compelled to consider the facets of their life that they believe they will be able to affect. Participants envision a balanced life through moderation or equal emphasis placed on work and leisure activities. Chad, for example, indicated that he is “very active mentally, physically, in my community, and my family. And living out my values while still having fun” is key to a balanced life.

Independence is essential, particularly for Caucasian male participants. An independent life is characterized by freedom of choice without consequences or responsibilities. For Wayne, independence means, “you work how long you want to work, and where you want to work . . . just pursuing what you want to pursue.” The men who shared the desire of an independent life have experienced consequences previously for similar choices, but still emphasized this value. Even though some participants embrace the possibility of absolute freedom, they also recognize the commitments they are bound to uphold. Yet, these individual still yearn for the possibility of autonomy. An independent life seems idealized by these participants, and they have not been able to reconcile their desire versus the responsibilities that they know are expected of them as an adult.

Overwhelmingly, participants, frequently Caucasian men, seek happiness in their future. Achieving happiness differs and depends on the individual’s priorities, which may reflect the interpersonal, economic or personal aspects. Family and financial stability are prominent. Participants explained that happiness is internally focused primarily and is
achieved through a person’s attitude, accomplishments, internal reflection or the prioritization of the aspects of life that are important to the individual. Lydia captured this essence of the participants’ perspective when she stated, “You just need to identify what makes you happy and do that.” Other areas that contribute to the individuals’ happiness include creating a family, living a comfortable and worry-free life, being free to make choices, cultivating spiritual connections, and pursuing passions. Andrew, for example, reflected. “I guess just seeing people I know, friends, extended family members live out their dreams. Go off and do what they want. Be really happy and just have the lifestyle they always wanted. So, I’ve wanted that too.”

Although I doubt many people desire a life of misery, participants seemed to have an idealized perspective about their future. Furthermore, they believe that their happiness will just occur; among the participants this perception appears to be a recurrent perspective. For the most part, they do not appear to consider the possibility of difficulties that might alter their life journey or divert their plans. Their perspective may be connected to the invincibility youth often perceive or merely to their limited life experience.

**Influences.** Family, again, provides the greatest influence that affects the participants’ projections about the future, although religion also contributes. Many participants desire to achieve goals in their future that are similar to their current family values and rarely described perspectives that are divergent from their current life experiences. Participants portray their parents as role models and wish to emulate many aspects of their lives. Karl, as he discussed the fundamentals in his life, explained the influence his parents have provided.
They've always taught me to, to take responsibility for my actions [and] to
never blame [others]. I guess my parents taught me to be happy with
accomplishment. And, um, so, it’s pretty much, mainly, all my parents. . . . .

It's been backed up by my own life experiences.

The continued reliance upon the values and attitudes that have been established in the
participants' youth through family is noteworthy and necessitates further examination within
the conception of a generation. Because the diversity of viewpoints throughout the personal
attributes is prominent and do not consistently correspond with the limited description of any
generation, consideration of this aspect is necessary.

Religion, specifically for women, is the other factor that influences some participants’
viewpoint about their future. I contend that even though this topic was discussed separately
from the other areas of influence, religion is closely connected to the values the participants’
parents have stressed throughout their youth, and therefore is not mutually exclusive.

Moreover, the values and ideals emphasized through religion are not distinct, but instead are
interwoven. Cassandra, who believes that living a conservative lifestyle and upholding the
ethics and morals defined in the Bible are essential to her lifestyle, exemplified this
relationship. She stated, "That's [her conservative lifestyle] certainly been influenced by
being raised in a Christian household and my parents. By my religion".

Participants expressed a variety of priorities regarding their future that are
characterized as interpersonal, economic or personal. Their perspectives are idealized and
often overlook undesirable situations. Family continues to prevail in terms of influences
although religion is connected to the participants' perspective.
As has been demonstrated, the personal attributes—family, gender roles, education, religion, lifestyle and the future—provide a critical framework to understand the participants, and, in turn, offer valuable insight about the values and priorities that guide them. However, generational theories have ignored these perspectives. Homogenous and heterogeneous aspects about the participants are apparent. In some instances, demographic background provides a commonality that informs some of the perspectives, although not consistently. As has been described throughout this chapter, the relationship participants have with their family is robust and seemingly establishes the foundation for the majority of their viewpoints. The connection to family, particularly parents, cannot be ignored and is the principle source the participants rely upon to develop their values, priorities, and perspectives that guide their lives. Because of this bond, I contend that previous generational conceptualizations are incomplete as they disregard this aspect of understanding and have only focused generational descriptions on the societal priorities. In the next section, I will demonstrate that even though societal context underscores a common experience, the personal attributes are the lens through which the participants experience and view the world and cannot be absent from generational understandings.

**Societal Attributes**

Based on the generational literature, the societal attributes are defined as the historical events, such as war and widespread crisis, and the prevailing attitudes in society. Theorists have focused their characterization of generations based on the events that occur specifically during a generation’s youth and suggest that these occurrences provide the foundation for predominant attitudes within the generation. A number of historical wide-ranging events have occurred since the participants in this study were born (1984-1991) including, but not
limited to: multiple school shootings, such as Columbine, the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the collapse of the housing market and economic downturn, Hurricane Katrina, and the election of the first African American President in the United States, Barak Obama. Furthermore, even though not a specific stand-alone event, the widespread use of computers and portable electronic devices in addition to the advent of the Internet have been contributed to dramatic lifestyle changes around the world during the participants’ lifetime.

In order to understand the significant issues and phenomenon that define and guide the participants, I asked them to share their understanding of recent national or global issues that have defined their generation, provide their perspective about the economy, the change in political leadership in the United States, the wars, and technological advancements. Their reactions to the events that occurred during their youth are varied and reflect both homogeneous and heterogeneous viewpoints.

Primarily, the participants’ conception of the topics that are expected to define them or contribute to their outlook is examined through their voiced values, attitudes and priorities, which have been internalized. The events themselves appear not to have altered their perception of the world and certainly have not evidenced the creation of a collective response.

**Technology**

Even though the advancement and growth of technology during the participants’ youth is not a singular event, the significance of technology is apparent and more noteworthy to them than any of the historical events of their time. Participants are aware of the proliferation, prevalence, and availability of technology that has emerged during their youth.
and recognize different usage patterns between generations. Furthermore, participants specifically recognized that through technology global development has occurred. However, they also recognize that the widespread use of technology has created social barriers, specifically; they believe that interpersonal skills and community connections have declined. Because of their ceaseless use of technology, participants attributed several characteristics to their generation.

The intense language participants used to describe their relationship with technology is indicative of its proliferation as well as their dependence on it. Simultaneously, they feel addicted and handicapped; yet believe that they cannot survive without the technologies. Furthermore, the participants believe technology serves as a “lifeline” and provides them with a “safety blanket,” which allows them to be connected to others at their convenience. Obsessed with gadgets, they specified that they are “plugged in,” which refers to their immediate access to technology and their ability to connect with others quickly. If they misplace one of their tools, such as a smart phone, panic ensues. Chad aptly captured their perspective as he specified that the rapid advancements in technology are the salient event that defines his generation. “[It’s] the catalyst in which we, I guess, define, invest and cherish so much.” Likewise, participants recognized the proliferation of technology that has been infused into their daily living, and therefore they cannot imagine a world without it. Rashi indicated that technology has “become a part of everybody’s everyday life.”

As a result, their lives have become easier and convenient because they utilize the technology to complete tasks in ways that previously would have been less efficient, which enhances their independence and provides empowerment. For instance, students who are required to complete a research paper were previously required to go to their library to find
books, articles, or information; now, with Internet access, students can search for the same information by logging in to their library database system or find on-line resources. They are no longer reliant upon the constraints of the library operating hours, nor do the resources available limit them.

Participants identified the Internet as a demarcation from one generation to the next specifically as high-speed Internet access began to infiltrate households. They identified this marker as a notable change that occurred during their childhood. Internet access signifies a recognizable shift by which they access information and the medium that they use to communicate. They recalled these differences from before and after the Internet became widespread. Bill remarked:

I feel like in '94 or '95, computers . . . started taking off, and the Internet really started taking off. . . . Things really started to rapidly change. . . . When I was born and when computers really started taking off and when technology really started taking off, I was young enough to where I could pick it up pretty easily. And I was young enough to where, you know, it's been a really big part of my life since I was a kid . . . It was . . . the neonatal stages of it. . . . So it's almost like I grew up at the same time as the Internet did. . . . I feel like kids that are younger, much younger than me, have a different level of dependence and immersion in the technological world than I did when I was a kid.

As a result, the participants have simultaneously come of age with the growth of the Internet. Therefore, they appreciate the changes that have occurred related to technology, which they
believe cannot be replicated for other generations. Consequently, the participants conclude that they have insight that older and younger generations cannot understand.

Even though Bill identifies in his statement a technological delineation between his generation and younger generations related to the Internet, many participants remarked that older generations are less able to adapt to new technologies. For these participants, technology serves as bookends for the beginning and end points of their generation. They believe that younger people who have not lived through the Internet explosion take it for granted; and older people who remember life before the Internet, are reluctant to embrace it as they do. For them, the population that experienced the evolution of the Internet as they did falls within the bookends of their generation.

Participants believe that their own growth concurrent with technology allows them to be efficient and adaptable to technological changes. Even though they are proud of their ability to adjust to new technologies, participants indicated that, in turn, they are required to maintain their proficiency in order to remain competitive with their peers. They equate technological skills with their ability to be successful. In the current world environment, technological skills are equivalent to farming skills during the agricultural period. Specifically, they indicated that the technological skills that are essential in the job market are vital to maintain and improve. Kristy explained that she is constantly on the computer so that, "I don't feel myself falling behind."

Most participants appreciate the efficiencies they believe technology imparts daily, such as the convenience of personal and business transactions, connections to others, and the accessibility of information. Penny, for example, explained that through technology she can "handle general business" more quickly. "I am always trying to figure out the easiest way to
do this or what's the quickest way I can maximize my time.” Therefore, she feels that with technology her life is easier and more efficient. Furthermore, participants indicate that they have instantaneous access to friends or family because of the technology they utilize. Thus, they feel connected to others and want immediate responses in all aspects of their lives. Heather explained, “We have the Internet. We have text messaging. Everything [so] that we can contact [with] other people and discuss, like, with the new trend. What’s going on tonight? Things like that. We’re all interconnected.”

The connections that they possess are more than interpersonal. The participants explained that they have immediate access to world news and information. Colin specifically described his experience in the classroom, as he was able to search for information on his computer that was relevant to the class discussion. He stated, “We wouldn’t have known that were it not for the Internet.” Furthermore, he acknowledges that due to advancements in technology the classroom has changed in a positive direction. Even though some participants recognized that they were able to access relevant information for classroom discussions, they did not quantify whether the classroom environment was improved or if they observe more engaged classmates. It seems that technology has become a natural part of the classroom; facts and information can be easily accessed to add to the conversations.

Many participants also recognize that technology contributes to medical advancements, which has both personal and societal advantages. Craig, for example, had leukemia while he was in high school. He believes that he benefited directly from the progress in cancer research and by the time he is an adult more cures will be discovered. Additionally, participants specified that medical innovations serve as a catalyst for other societal change. They indicated that newer medicines for AIDS and HIV have been
developed and therefore, lives are saved. Furthermore, as Wade suggested water-purifying tablets have been developed as a result of advancements in medical research and signify changes in the world due to progression. These tablets, specifically, are used in third world countries, which significantly alter these citizens’ existence. Participants suggest that because of advancements in technology, further medical progress will occur. For them, the advancements contribute to the optimism they have about future changes they will be able to effect.

Even though many of the participants discussed positive outcomes as a result of the advancements in technology, some expressed concern about social isolation that has developed, particularly declining interpersonal skills and relationships as well as limited connections to the broader community. The participants have observed fewer spontaneous interactions on campus and more seclusion. Participants from Liberal Arts University and from non-Caucasian backgrounds from both campuses were most likely to articulate this perspective. Simultaneously, utilizing headphones and iPods to listen to music permits students to be entertained and current with the generation’s music, but their use also blocks instant interaction. Lori illustrated this conundrum.

[Technology’s] allowed us to keep ties on people that, like, in our parents’ generation we would’ve lost connections to. . . . It’s weird because it allows us to be connected not with people right around us, but with people that we had connections to or that are far away. . . . But we’re isolated because, you know, when you’re walking to class you’re not actually talking to anybody anymore. You’re just listening to your, you know, whatever you have on your iPod. And you don’t talk to people when you’re on a class trip on a bus or
something. You're just listening to your iPod or you're on your cell phone or something like that. That's why it's isolating.

However, savvy students elect to use the equipment to be secluded. Karen, for example, wears her iPod headphones in the library so that others will think she is listening to music. Thus, she is intentionally isolating herself from her peers.

Other participants desire greater interaction. Ella stated, “People can’t communicate with one another. That creates a lot of problems in relationships. No one really seems to have close relationships with one another anymore.” She believes that a dichotomous dynamic is present in society that encourages people to be in constant contact, but instead a false sense of connectedness is created. Participants who expressed concern about the lack of community between people mentioned social networking sites frequently. Karl specifically discussed Facebook and the false sense of community he perceives. He indicated that people feel they are connected to others through their constant postings on the site, but instead the person is only interacting with a computer. He stated it is not “a very healthy way to be living.”

Because some participants are concerned about the social effects resulting from the current widespread use of technology, they resist acquiring the latest gadget, limit their use of social networking sites, or minimize their consumption of technology. Bill, for example, stated, “Technology sometimes fulfills things that we need to have happened, you know, or that we need. But sometimes, I think, it suggests things and it makes things we don’t need.” Even though many participants embrace technology and the enhancements they perceive in their lives, some participants are acutely aware of drawbacks and the potential implications for society.
Participants, primarily the seniors, believe that due to the prevalence and pervasiveness of technology, their generation has developed several characteristics such as being fast-paced, impatient, and selfish; further they require constant stimulation or instant gratification. These characteristics were often discussed concurrently. Lewis eloquently described the interrelationship of these traits through the artifact he actually brought to the interview.

I decided to bring a microwave. . . . I feel like my generation is used to things instantly. We want instant gratification for our actions and the microwave basically . . . it revolutionized cooking. It used to take a long time to make a meal, a dinner. And now, with a microwave, you can have it, a TV dinner, in like, 3 or 4 minutes, and I think that just symbolizes our generation. We want everything quick, fast, and in a hurry. And I was debating whether I was bringing, like, an iPhone. . . . I was going to bring something like that, but I think a microwave more than those captures the essence of how much, how much we really want things immediately.

The characteristics that they attributed to their peers appear to be in stark contrast with the perceived benefits that technology provides the participants—convenience and easier lives. These contradictions, such as connected and isolated, in addition to the drawbacks described earlier, suggest that even though the participants consider the advancements in technology to be a shared and uniting experience, their perspectives about the implications still diverge.

Indeed, technology has flourished during the participants’ youth. They acknowledged its significance and elevated its importance more than any stand-alone historical event. This tribute supports the problem associated with characterizing a generation solely upon the
societal attributes. However, the participants’ contradictory perspectives are apparent. They specifically differed about the social implications and indicated that both interconnectedness and barriers have emerged with their use of technology. These opposing viewpoints suggest that even though a similar experience can occur, the reactions of individuals are still vital to consider.

**Defining World, National, and Global Events**

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the election of President Obama, the economy, technological advancements, Hurricane Katrina, global warming, gay rights, and healthcare were the prominent historical events the participants referenced. As they reflected upon the significant events that have occurred during their lifetime, the topics that were the most meaningful are often situated within an individual’s value set or are related to a personal connection to the event, rather than being a central issue impacting their lives.

**September 11th, 2001.** Participants identified September 11th most often as a defining event for them and their peers. However, they portrayed the actual event as less momentous than I would have expected. They recognized the events on September 11th as the catalyst for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and have contributed to the political, economic and international climate in the United States, which will be expanded upon in the relevant sections. Participants were divided in their assessment of the reactions of Americans. Some acknowledged their own emotional reaction and have accepted that America was changed by the events of the day. Furthermore, the participants who are personally connected to September 11th either through an individual involved in the events or a life situation described the events as more intimate and of note.
Generational literature suggests that a major national crisis, such as September 11th, would evoke a shared response. However, the participants' reactions are more varied. At opposite ends of the spectrum are the contradictory perspectives about whether or not the United States became united or divided as a result of the terrorist attacks. Participants who believe September 11th united the country explained that patriotism was ignited; a salient emotional response occurred, and people's lives were changed. Andrew, for example, believes September 11th united people. He described the rallying affect that the event stimulated and explained that whether people supported or opposed the subsequent events, September 11th "really brought people together." Contrarily, Robert described the same events as that it "instilled a false sense of hope in our country." For him, September 11th highlighted the vulnerabilities in the country. Additionally, this event supported his theory that government is not as transparent as others believe and that many events in history have been manipulated to benefit those in power.

Participants recalled that September 11th provoked fear, distrust and national sadness. Furthermore, they felt they had lost the safety and security that they had previously believed to exist. Ella, a freshman, specifically, realized "that the world isn't a perfect, good place... Really bad things [can happen]... anywhere, anytime." Although some participants expressed these concerns and recognize that their interaction with the world had evolved; others appear to be detached. Sharon, a senior, for example, stated, "I don't feel like it impacted a lot of people... A lot of us didn't know what was going on. We really didn't understand it." The conflicting perspectives shared by the participants would not have been expected based on the literature; yet they exist. Because the participants were 10-16 years old at the time of the terrorist attacks occurred on September 11th, their age differences seems
to be an expected element that might explain their varied response. However, their awareness and reaction differences could not be grouped based on merely age. Therefore, differences exist among peer groups and it seems that a common age or experience does not provide an adequate framework to explain a generation.

The participants’ reaction to September 11th was elevated if they specifically knew someone who had the potential to be harmed or if they had a personal connection to the unfolding events. This heightened awareness suggests that the event alone is an insufficient explanation for the possible reaction of an individual. Rashi, for example, was “budged” and saddened, in part, because her grandmother was almost a victim. She believes that the events of that day left a “scar on everybody’s heart” and the nation continues to feel some pain related to that day. Clearly, Rashi’s intense response was caused by the possibility of losing a family member.

However, the circumstances can be subtler. Maureen’s viewpoint about September 11th is striking because of her surroundings and her subsequent reaction. At the time, her family was living in Germany in an American military community that experienced significant changes in daily routine due to increased security and heightened attentiveness. She indicated that her friends in America at the time did not share this experience. Maureen was “really freaked out. . . . [I] became more aware of terrorism and how it applies to me and my family and friends.” Even though Maureen was raised as a Catholic, the events were “probably one of the subtle or indirect, unconscious . . . reasons for me being very religious. I’ve become very dependent [on religion], not very dependent, but probably much, a lot more than others.” For Maureen, the events on September 11th and the resulting changes to her daily life appear to represent a coming of age experience coupled with an awareness of
terrorism and violence, both of which eliminated the innocence of childhood that she believes many of her peers did not directly experience.

The participants in the study ranged in age from 10-16 at the time the terrorist attacks on the United States occurred. The generational theorists suggest that the events that occur during an individual’s adolescence are pivotal in their growth and development. Based on the participants’ perspectives, I contend that even though September 11th occurred at this proposed pivotal time, it appears that they were perhaps too young for the actual event to have defined their perspective about the world. Even though a seven-year span exists from the youngest to the oldest participant, similar perspectives where not shared based upon age. It seems that the participants were aware that an historic event occurred and that subsequently American lives were forever changed. They also understand that they continue to experience the ramifications of September 11th, in particular, the economic climate and the diminished international standing of the United States. However, their connection to the actual event has been, for the most part, understated unless they had a direct connection.

Wars. September 11th was the catalyst for participants’ awareness of terrorism and signified the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even though the wars have been ongoing for the majority of the participants’ lives, the participants were more likely to describe their reaction to the war in Iraq than Afghanistan. Primarily, their perceptions about the wars may be categorized as connected, detached, or skeptical.

Participants who have a personal connection, such as a knowing someone who is actively deployed or is a member of a military family, have been more affected by the wars. They expressed concern, experience fear, or feel unsettled about the world’s perception of Americans. Lori, for example, has friends who are enlisted and her father works as a civilian
for the military. She explained that she is afraid to watch the daily news primarily because she might discover that one of her friends fighting in the wars has been either injured or killed. Furthermore, some participants believe they are unfairly judged and vilified by the world due to America’s involvement in war. Cassandra, who was raised in a military family, feels unfairly hated by the rest of world solely because of her American status. Because of their close connections with either the military or individuals deployed, these participants are continually reminded of the realities of war, which seemed less apparent for participants without military connections. Therefore, those related to the military understand the world with the knowledge that individuals may be harmed at any time or they have experienced negative reactions from people in other countries; they appear to be more concerned and engaged with the events than their peers who do not have similar personal and familial experiences.

Many participants feel detached from the wars because their lives have not been directly impacted by the conflicts nor do they have constant reminders of the consequences of war. Pat, for example, indicated that the only change he has experienced are increased gas prices. He reflected that with prior wars Americans were actively engaged, protested and were likely to experience significant hardships, which he has not witnessed. Furthermore, for Pat, the term war has been diminished because of its widespread use to engage in social action, such as the “war on drugs.” Pat’s believes that during wartimes everyone makes sacrifices and are actively knowledgeable about the conflict. His current experience contradicts his definition because he has experienced minimal life changes during the current wars. Therefore, he views the wars as “just killing people overseas.”
Participants suggested that because the wars have been ongoing for the majority of their lives and the omnipresence in the media they have become desensitized. Virginia explained, the war is not "a front and center issue unless it directly affects you any more... Nobody cares about it." Participants compared the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with Vietnam and specified that because people are not protesting and actively engaged they have become disinterested.

Skepticism and questions about the United States' continued involvement in the wars is prevalent, particularly for men. These participants expressed distrust in the government and felt uninformed about the specific reasons for engaging and remaining in a state of war. Allen, for example, views the wars as "a byproduct of something greater [greed]," and indicated that the communication has been "just outright lies, like, manipulation...absolutely bunk information out there to justify the war." The participants' suspicion, in some cases, was directed specifically at people in powerful positions in government. Lewis illustrated the deception he feels.

I think we just have people in power who have issues. And, like, on a chessboard, the king isn't doing too much fighting. He stays behind a lot of pawns, and very well protected. So, I think that's what's going on. And I think, just seeing that makes me want, want more equality and more access to information so we stop all of this, ah, fighting other peoples' war.

Likewise, participants are unclear about the length of the wars and what role the United States should maintain abroad. Penny stated, "I still don't really understand why we are in war for as long as we have been." It appears that unresolved questions contribute to these participants' perspective about the wars.
The participants have lived in a country that has been engaged in war for the majority of their lives from the Gulf War to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, they primarily discussed the war based upon the conflict in Iraq. Participants are either connected, disconnected, or are skeptical about America’s involvement. Furthermore, their perceptions are related to whether or not they are affected directly.

Political Leadership. In November of 2008, the people of the United States voted and changed the political leadership in the country. A Democratic majority in the Senate and the House of Representatives emerged victorious along with a Democratic President, Barak Obama, the first man from a racially diverse background to obtain the position. Overwhelmingly, participants described the change in the Presidency, but neglected to note the change in Congress. Participants recognized the historical significance of President Obama’s election regardless of their support for his political platform. Furthermore, they believe that Obama was elected because of the youth vote and its commitment to change. Most participants are hopeful, optimistic and empowered as a result. Political affiliation, race, academic class standing, and social issues are relevant to the participant perspective.

Participants are aware of the historical significance of the nation electing the first racially diverse president in the United States regardless of their own political affiliation. Chad, for example, raised in a conservative southern family, described himself as a moderate. He stated, “[I] never thought [the country] would have an African American president in my, in my lifetime.” Furthermore, he believes that the election represents positive societal change, which is suggestive of future changes that his generation will be able to inspire and accomplish. Andrew whose parents are Republican echoed a similar perspective. He stated, “I think that because there’s a Black president now . . . everyone knows, like other
generations . . . that our generation is more open-minded.” Lydia’s perspective about the historical significance of President Obama’s election is striking. She recognized, “It’s a really important achievement. It’s something that couldn’t have happened 40 or 50 years ago.” However, she explained that she has grown up at a time during which discrimination and racism was not prominent. “It doesn’t seem like a big deal to us [her peers]. It’s just like another person running for President.” Even though these participants recognized the historical implication of Barak Obama’s election to the presidency, their conception of the journey to this achievement and the ensuing results appears to vary. These subtle differences seem to be meaningful, particularly to the individual.

Concurrently, participants discussed their individual and collective ability to create change and their openness to diverse viewpoints as Andrew and Lydia suggested. Their conception of change seems to be focused on the political and economic climate in the United States, and social issues, such as the environment or rights for traditionally underrepresented groups. Because they believe they can effect societal change through their acceptance of others, the participants credit themselves with electing President Obama. Furthermore, most participants believe that their generational voice is powerful and therefore, they can contribute to the direction of the country. Andrew illustrated this perspective. He stated, “I guess, [my generation is] ready for something new or different. A change. Not the harsh society, societal ideals that maybe once existed.” To them, the election of Obama is indicative of this outlook and their generation’s first prominent contribution to future changes. Heather explained:

Well, I think one of the things that really was a positive thing, that has helped, kind of, make us proud of our generation would be the election last year. . . .
People were finally realizing that they have a voice, and they can make decisions. They can make change and with some of the campaign being directed towards people my age we kind of felt a sense of . . . our vote actually matters. We need to go out. We need to do something, and we have to think. We can’t just follow in someone’s footsteps. We have to be independent and vote and do something for ourselves and for our generation.

Participants’ ability to effect change in a comprehensive way resonated with many and contributes to their understanding of their influence on this election cycle. Seniors, in particular, are more aware of political issues and believe they contributed to the outcomes of the presidential election more than freshmen. This difference was pronounced for seniors because they were able to actively participate in the political campaign and vote, whereas freshmen were too young to be involved in the same way.

Many participants are hopeful and optimistic about the direction of the nation as a result of the change in political leadership. Even though they are positive about President Obama’s tenure, their hope and optimism seems to stem from the perception that changes will occur related to issues that are important to them, such as the country’s international influence and social issues, specifically gay rights and healthcare. Pat, for example, has a disabled husband and discussed how “the changing of the guard has been the biggest stress relief ever.” Having been fired during the Bush administration for being gay, Pat wonders how the records of gay marriages might have been used during that timeframe. He expressed fear and concern about what other discrimination he might have experienced if the political leadership had not changed. Furthermore, the passing of the healthcare bill was of great importance to him. Neither partner had health insurance. When Pat’s husband was turning
blue, he remembers having to “make the decision, can we afford to go to the hospital because it would crush us financially.” Pat’s hope and optimism is directly related to his perception that the Democratic Party supports gay rights and the priority Barak Obama has emphasized regarding a national healthcare bill.

Participants who identified as either conservative or Republican do share the same optimism. Instead, these participants expressed fear and nervousness about the direction of the country and President Obama’s qualifications. Karl, specifically, indicated that he is frightened about socialized healthcare, the financial downturn, the worth of his education, and the radical programs enacted during the Obama administration, such as bank buy-outs. Participants who questioned President Obama’s qualifications concentrated their concern in two primary areas—his ability to address the war on terror and the economic crisis. Cassandra explained, “I’m still nervous ’cause they [other conservatives] don’t feel that Obama has enough experience to deal with this crisis [war and economy].” Whether the participant supports or expressed concern about the change in political leadership, their perspective is grounded in their personal values—often parallel to their family’s orientation—rather than a shared generational perspective.

In particular, African American participants’ perception about the election was intensified. They are inspired to achieve and feel uninhibited by previous racial barriers, feel a connection to the President, and believe that racial obstacles have been removed for historically oppressed groups, such as women or minorities. Martha illustrated this perspective.

Simply because Barak Obama is Black. But it just lets you know that anybody can be President if you really wanted to. And, it’s a racial barrier
that’s not there any longer. It’s like, if that’s what I want, I can do it because I can if I put my mind to it.

Not all African American participants are inspired though. Lewis, who campaigned for Obama, is concerned for Blacks in America. He believes that racial barriers have been removed, but he is conflicted and unsure about whom to trust any longer. He stated:

Race isn’t a unifying factor any more. I think it’s moving toward something that’s honestly bad for Black people in general. . . . We’re moving towards a society where, where people who look different and have different religious ideas and that type of stuff will be accepted. But they’ll only be accepted if they give up a part of who they are. And I don’t want to sound like I’m saying Obama sold out to become President because I think that’s a negative too.

The implications of President Obama’s election related to race relations in the United States are apparent, yet the ramifications are dependent upon the individual’s worldview. Some find inclusion, whereas Lewis, at least, is concerned about the effects of assimilation.

In addition to the political shift that Obama represents, participants identified with his personal characteristics. Allen, for example, described President Obama as the “all-American kid” who hailed from a humble background, and therefore he “really embodies what the United States should be. The image we would like to project.” Allen, whose background is similar, can relate to the path Obama has traveled. For Allen, the President projects the ideal of someone who succeeds in America.

At the other end of the spectrum, participants described concerns related to President Obama’s seemingly quick, unquestioned rise on the political stage. Maureen, a Republican,
is concerned that the Obamas are compared to the Kennedys and they have not accomplished any of their goals yet. She is also troubled by the attention Obama has received because, “Well, technically, he’s not the first African American. He’s the first half, half, half. . .” These conflicting perspectives represent the range of responses that the participants expressed. Furthermore, the varying viewpoints support the contention that individuals do not coalesce around a singular historical event and the personal attitudes and values continue to be emphasized regardless of the circumstances.

The participants recognized the political leadership changes in the United States in 2008 as an historical marker because the first racially diverse president was elected; yet they ignored that the Democrats secured the majority in the national elections. Many participants perceived that they were able to directly affect the outcome of the election and their role in the election of President Obama to be considerable. Furthermore, they believe that this is the first of many changes they will contribute in their lifetime. However, participants’ individual backgrounds, such as political affiliation, race, and academic class standing, along with their attitudes and values—often similar to those of their family—about relevant social issues shaped their perspective rather than a collective response.

The Economy. The participants’ reaction to the downturn in the economy seems to be closely associated with the degree to which they are personally affected at present. Their primary focal point is their ability to secure employment as they enter the workforce. Freshmen are more optimistic than seniors about the economy rebounding and future employment opportunities. Seniors, primarily, expressed more emotion as they are facing the job market sooner. Furthermore, participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are confident that they possess the skills to adapt to the environment and that their peers may not.
Freshmen, predominately, are hopeful that the economy will rebound by the time they enter the workforce. Virginia believes that the economy will be "on the up and up again" by the time she reaches graduation and is not worried by the current economic climate in the United States. Often these younger participants have not experienced a change in their daily living due to the economic change and are less conscious to any potential effects to them regardless of socioeconomic background. Maureen stated, "I’m not aware of [the economy]. I think because it really hasn’t struck home for me.” These participants seem to feel protected and buffered from the economic realities in the United States because they have not been required to make any life adjustments. Thus, they feel removed from the realities of the downturn in the economy. Therefore, they do not feel pressed to be attentive about individual or national implications.

At the other end of the spectrum are seniors and Caucasian men. The imminent life circumstances they are facing—graduation and a weak job market—color their perspective. For some, they are unprepared for their current circumstance and feel unsettled, deceived, and apprehensive about their futures. They are unsure of securing employment and worry about the current value of their education. The deception they feel is specifically connected to the opportunities they perceived their education would provide. These participants entered college with the belief that their degrees would guarantee them a job after college because of the messages they have received from parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and society. As Penny stated, “Get good grades. Go to college. Get a good job. That’s just, like the American way.” Many of the participants have since discovered that their perception is no longer accurate. Pat, for example, first attended Research University when he was 18 years old and because of choices he made, he failed out. After working a couple of years and
attending community college, Pat, now a senior, returned to Research University. He stated, “Before 2008, it was, um, reasonability be damned—study what you love, um. And now, it’s study what you love, but realize that you’re not going to get a good job. That [sense of freedom] doesn’t exist anymore.”

Some participants who are troubled by the current economic climate have employed strategies to counteract the hurdles they believe they will encounter. For some, they have elected to pursue graduate education, are exploring multiple career options, seeking positions that will lead to job stability, or are trying to work harder, which they hope will enable them to stand out from their competition, providing them with an advantage in the job market. Penny, who has friends who have not found employment since graduating, understands that graduates can no longer “put your eggs in one basket,” and therefore, are required to explore multiple educational and job options. She believes that just because one has a degree in a specific major, the specialization no longer equates to employment in that particular field. The notion that the economic climate has changed the playing field is apparent to these participants. Likewise, they are actively altering their plan and are embracing the circumstances. Pat, for example, joined a company management-training program where he currently works part-time, as a way to respond.

Not all participants feel oppressed by the economy. These participants believe they are situated well to respond in a sluggish economy. Those from lower socioeconomic status have lived modestly and are adept at living frugally. According to Lewis, “If you’re already in the bottom, it doesn’t get any worse basically. I think it [the economic downturn] just expanded that experience [of being without] to people that aren’t used to feeling it.” Furthermore, a few participants believe that they can overcome the economic obstacles
because they are able to take advantage of their social identity and preparation. Wade, for example, stated:

'Cause I’m going into a field that’s demanded, you know. In education, they’re looking for Black males. And I’m a math major. So, nobody wants to do math. So, I’m already in high demand off two, two characteristics, two qualities.

These participants are savvy about the job market and benefit from their academic strategy. Furthermore, they recognize a shift in society of hiring more minorities in underrepresented fields and are capitalizing on these opportunities.

Participants reacted differently to the downturn in the economy, and often their response was linked to their prominent life circumstances. Those who are about to enter the job market expressed greater concern than participants who are removed. Participants are strategizing and altering their plans to accommodate the unexpected recession. Some participants, primarily those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, feel more prepared to and better able to acclimate to the economic shift. The participants’ varied reaction to the changed economy supports the argument that the societal attributes are an insufficient measure to gauge the priorities and attitude of a generation, even though for some participants their race, socioeconomic status and academic class standing are salient markers. Furthermore, the individual circumstances provide the framework for the participants’ response to the economic downturn.

Social Issues. Spontaneously, participants identified several social issues and events, such as gay rights, global warming and Hurricane Katrina as additionally significant societal occurrences that are relevant to their generational identity. The issues are pertinent to the
participants because of personal experiences that create a heightened awareness, personal agency, or generational agency, which are often intertwined.

A personal connection to a particular issue magnifies the participant's reaction to the topic. Lori, for example, has a sister who is gay. She is dissatisfied with the current climate for gay people in the United States and is concerned about the prejudice and discrimination they experience. She explained:

The United States is one of the few countries in the Western world that isn’t moving towards giving queer people more rights. So that’s pretty embarrassing, you know. We try to be the best in the world and we’re still, we’re still persecuting a small, a part of our population.

Lori’s love and concern for her sister certainly prioritizes this issue for her. The personal connections can be subtler although just as important. Maureen and her family previously lived on the military base in Ft. Hood, Texas. After she heard about the shootings on the base that killed 13 and wounded 29 people, she realized, “Holy crap, that affects me personally . . . a childhood place that I thought was safe and secure is not.”

For some, the personal connection to an issue is linked to race. Martha and Karen, African Americans, expressed concern about the government’s response to Hurricane Katrina and reflected upon the implications for American’s from lower socioeconomic status. Karen, specifically, stated, “It seemed like they didn’t get as much help as they could have” and this was striking to her. Karen does not understand the government’s response. She commented, “We’re, like, supposed to be the wealthiest, most advanced country in the world. It seems like we should have been able to help them more and sooner.”
For some, their awareness of an issue results in personal agency. Allen, for example, feels a personal responsibility to help sustain the earth. He stated, “Global warming scares the shit out of me.” Allen is appalled that people deny the environmental changes and damages. He hopes to own a self-sustainable farm in the future. Allen understands that he is required to make daily choices that support a sustainable world if he wants the current environmental status to change. Thus, his concern for the environment “influences a lot of my decisions more so than . . . a lot of other stuff.” It seems that the participants who identified the environment as an issue recognize the implications if their personal actions do not support environmentally sound practices.

Even though participants suggest that they have personal agency regarding the environment, they also believe that it is an issue the generation has the ability and an obligation to change. Furthermore, they believe previous generations have ignored their duty to preserve the environment. Lori, for example, lived in Korea for nine years and witnessed environmental problems that occurred because of rampant, unrestricted development. She is pursuing a career in environmental policy. She stated, “[The environment is] important because if we [her generation] don’t protect it, there won’t be anything left, and we can’t really survive if we don’t have an environment”.

Other participants believe that their generation has an obligation to respond both because societal acceptability has been reached and prior generations have ignored the issue. Around the time of some of the interviews, a high-ranking state government official made a proclamation that all public universities could not adopt discrimination policies that included sexual orientation without authorization from the state’s legislature. However, most public colleges already had policies in place. State college students quickly organized and
successful student protests and activism occurred on statewide campuses. Diane witnessed these events unfold. She believes that, “[Gay people have] been having this fight for generations. But, this generation, I feel, has the power to change the future.” Diane is confident that her generation is able to tackle this issue because of greater social acceptance of gay rights. She believes that older generations would have reacted and rallied if they were faced with the same circumstances.

A personal connection to a social issue creates an awareness that others may ignore if they do not have similar knowledge or experience. For some, they are subsequently motivated to respond individually and make choices that support the issues. For others, they believe the issue is a prominent generational concern, such as the environment, that compels them to act. The power that a person’s individual circumstances command cannot be overlooked and further supports the contention that societal attributes alone do not create a collective response.

Conclusion

The historical events and attitudes of the time have been the primary basis for conceptualizing a generation. Yet, the participants in this study lack consensus regarding what should be the salient defining issues. Their perspectives about the predominant events that have occurred during their lifetime are inconsistent from person to person. Furthermore, the participants’ perspective about each specific event is interwoven with their values and their individual circumstances. The previous framework for conceptualizing a generation based solely on the major historical events or the perceived attitudes of the time appear to be limiting. I contend that the personal attributes are just as relevant after probing the societal attributes.
CHAPTER 5

Generations

As illustrated through the literature review, the concept of a generation is complex and the component emphasized depends on the focus of the researcher. Furthermore, the previous chapter verified that the members of any generation are multidimensional and cannot be understood with merely the societal attributes featured. In an effort to understand the current college-aged youth generation, I asked participants to define their generation, describe the characteristics of the generation, indicate whether or not they are similar or dissimilar to their peers, and provide their insight about the size of their generation. Additionally, they shared their observations of how other generations perceive them, what they believe is expected of them by society, and their perceptions about other generations. As I will illustrate, the variability among the perspectives is extensive. Furthermore, I will scrutinize Howe and Strauss’ (2000) portrayal of Millennials and discuss a new ways to conceptualize a generation.

Who are the Millennials?

The Millennial description espoused by Howe and Strauss (2000) is conceived primarily from the time-interval delineation and with an historical perspective. From this standpoint, they have reduced the generation to a mere seven characteristics. By ignoring the diversity within a generation, stereotypes are formed and perpetuated. Therefore, I sought to understand the participants’ perceptions about their generation from multiple viewpoints. I specifically asked participants whom they include in the generation, whether the size of the generation matters, what characteristics they would convey about their generation, and whether they are similar or dissimilar to their peers.
Age Range

Participants define their generation based on an age range primarily, although education and technological proficiency were cited as delineation points. The majority of participants indicated that their generation was born between 1985 and 1991 or 1992 or are aged 18-25, a seven-year timeframe. This conception of a generation contrasts with the commonly cited designation of approximately 20 years. Ella, for example, stated:

My generation consists of, probably somewhere, like, 15-16 to early 20s, and it seems like a really broad range. . . . I think there is, like, this, kind of, inward push from both ends, so that’s, kind of, what makes up that large group.

Furthermore, only one person identified the smallest increment as a two-year time period around the participant’s age and another specified the largest era, which included those who are birth to 30 years.

Participants specified education or technology, primarily, as the marker for delineating their generation from other generations. Related to education, they identified middle school, high school, or college often as endpoints between their generation and other generations. However, they most often identified the ability to adapt to technological change, such as the advent of the Internet or use portable electronic devices, as vital to understanding the shift from their generation from those older or younger. Cassandra captured the essence of both of these indicators. She stated:

My generation would be college students, high school students. People who have just graduated college. . . . I mean middle schoolers understand the technology I suppose. But there’s just that general understanding of what’s
going on in the world, and how it’s affecting us more than it is affecting our parents and such. . . . Technology and such is a big influence on our generation.

Educational years seem to be a logical foundation for the participants to conceive their generation because most of their life has been spent engaged in an educational setting. For most, no other major life events, such as marriage, careers, or parenthood, have occurred. Furthermore, the significance of technology as a part of the participants’ daily life is the consistent salient marker that defines their generation. Throughout the participants’ description of their generation their use of technology is consistently identified as the prominent differentiating point between them and other generations.

The two oldest participants, Pat and Allen, both 25, explained that they do not always identify with their college peers. Pat, for example, believes he is a part of the current generation but on the “far [early] edge” because of the differences he has observed regarding popular culture. In classroom discussions, Pat has been the only person knowledgeable about older popular culture references, but unaware of more recent icons. Contrarily, Allen does not feel a part of the college-aged generation. He was born in 1984. “I really feel like 1985 was the start of the new generation.” Allen believes that people born after 1985 always have had computers in the classroom and their experience with the Internet is similar to the experience people have today. He remembers the evolution of the Internet and believes younger people may not.

Younger participants also indicated that they witnessed the evolution of technology and, therefore, the participants’ observance of the growth of technology is not isolated merely with the older participants. However, their acknowledgement and awareness of
advances in technology is a meaningful indicator for the majority of participants. Even though Pat and Allen are the same age, their identification with the current college-aged population differs. They both suggest that their peers experience the world differently. Thus, the participants identify other generations at the point that they recognize differences between their experiences, and they can specify the origin of those changes. Furthermore, the particular topic and timeframe may occur at different points for each individual.

Many participants remarked that being young today is different than when they were the same age because younger children have greater exposure to violence, sexuality, and technology. Chad specifically described changes in movie ratings. He believes movies that are currently rated P-13 would have been rated R five years ago. Furthermore, he stated, “I have a seven-year old sister and the stuff she said to me . . . the information she has is so much a wider range of things than I’d ever imagined at her age. . . . It’s a whole different boat.” Chad’s awareness of difference provides insight into the shifts that occur as individuals begin to situate themselves within a generation. Therefore, the subtle changes that happen over time within society seem to develop into fissures that produce generational separation points.

Similar to Levine and Cureton (1998), the majority of participants conceptualize their generation falling within a seven-year span. Based on this perception, an immediate peer group may serve a more prominent role than the arbitrary two-decade timeframe that many generational theorists promote. Furthermore, even though participants identified a timeframe when asked, individual differences still exist as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Several participants were reluctant to define their generation because either they believe that nothing has occurred that defines them or they expressed concerns about
stereotyping. Karen, for example, could not identify a common experience for her
generation. She stated, “There hasn’t been any, like, mass collective movement across the
country for any one thing that has really changed much.” Therefore, a description of her
generation eludes her. Similarly, Robert avoided a specific generational definition because
he recognizes that within any generation differences exist. Furthermore, categorizing people
from a certain era is limited, which is not an accurate representation of the variety within the
generation.

I don’t know how to put this in terms of generations because I feel like it’s
different people in different generations. I mean, if you take the ’60s as an
example. That was all about free love and peace. They didn’t want war.
They didn’t want anything like that. But, then you have, like, the people that
do want it, [and] the people that are joining the military to go overseas to join
wars and stuff. It’s just a difference in opinion between people, and I don’t
want to necessarily pinpoint it on a generation.

Robert’s description is noteworthy. Generational theorists have primarily contextualized a
generation based on the societal or historical issues of the time and have ignored the variance
within a generation. Thus, the perceived similarities within a generation and the predominant
attitudes of the time are promulgated without consideration of any other elements, such as the
personal attributes. Consequently, the diversity or the heterogeneity within the generation is
disregarded.

Even though participants specified that their generational peers were born during a
particular period of time, they identified additional reference markers—education and
technology—to delineate membership. Furthermore, participants’ age range definition of
seven years challenges the commonly held perspective that a generation spans two decades. The awareness of difference appears to contribute to the acknowledgement of people belonging to another generation.

**Generational Size**

Time interval generational theorists propose that the size of a generation is relevant to the generation’s development and the impression that the generation forms on society. The Millennials are larger than any prior generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Therefore, I was interested in the participants’ perceptions about the size of their generation and if they believe the size will have the ability to influence society. Many participants were unaware of the size of their generation vis-a-vis others and did not believe that they currently have an effect on either individuals or society. If their generation’s size mattered to them, participants focused only on societal implications.

Many participants had not considered the size of their generation and were unsure if it is large or small compared to other generations. Therefore, their viewpoint may not be well developed and consistent. Lydia, for example, explained, “I don’t even really know what the size of my age group is.” Even though Diane did not specify the size of her generation, she believes it is currently inconsequential to society. However, she expects its influence will grow because her generation will be leading the country in the future. For participants who are unaware of the large size of their generation, they are equally unaware of their potential to influence; thus, the size is unimportant currently.

Participants who suggested that the size of their generation is meaningful stipulated that the effects are societal rather than individual. For some, their size has and will continue to be beneficial. Indu, for example, believes that her generation has the potential to advance
world cooperation and collaboration “because people are more exposed to different cultures.” Therefore, she believes that world prejudice will diminish. Conversely, Ella believes that the generation is primarily focused on personal gain. She is concerned that her generation will not be altruistic and that society will be harmed in the process. Even though the perspectives are contradictory, they suggest that the generation will leave an impression on the rest of society.

Participants, who believe their generation is large, commented about its ability to influence society. Furthermore, they believe that society is already courting them. Heather, for example, believes that the 2008 presidential election exemplified this perspective. She explained that her generation was targeted as potential voters in the election. As a result, they have are “powerful and have a voice.” She suggested that, “People want to make sure we are happy because if we’re not, you’re going to know it.” Heather’s observation and awareness of the attention her generation has received is important. If a significant number of people within the generation feel the same way, their potential to influence could be considerable.

Generational size does not seem to be an important topic to the participants at this stage of their life. Many participants are unaware of their size and do not believe it will be meaningful. For some, specifically those who have witnessed or experienced their influence understand and are more aware of future effects based on their generational size.

**Millennial Characteristics**

I asked participants to identify and describe the characteristics they associate with members of their generation. Based on Howe and Strauss’ (2000) conceptualization, the descriptions should have been consistent and portray the generation in a positive light.
However, the depictions that emerged are wide-ranging and demonstrate that the generation is multifaceted rather than one that is categorized by a mere seven characteristics. The participants’ define their generation both positively and negatively.

Contrary to Howe and Strauss (2000), the participants did not voice a collective description of the generation, but rather individual viewpoints predominate. Furthermore, the participants’ did not merely portray the generation from a positive perspective as Howe and Strauss report. Instead, participants attributed both positive and negative viewpoints about their generation. In general, freshmen, participants from higher socioeconomic status, or who attend Research University described their generation from a positive viewpoint more often.

**Technology.** Technology continues to be a meaningful reference point to explain distinctions about the generation. Participants consistently identified technology as a core component of their understanding of their generation and a delineating marker that separates them from both older and younger generations. Specifically, they associate technological adeptness and the subsequent efficiencies with their generation. Kristy, for example, stated, “I came up in the technology generation. . . . And, that’s really what . . . we’re focused on. . . . We have better access than any other generation.” She further explained that they utilize the technology in *all* aspects of their life and are no longer required to know everything because they “know where to go get it.” The participants’ identify technology as a tool that is used to enhance their access to information. They suggest that older generations were previously required to retain and recall more knowledge, and they are able to access the same information through the technology instantaneously. Indeed, the access and use of technology is the salient focal point in the participants understanding of their generation,
however the participants differ in terms of their perceptions about the effects on their generation.

Strikingly, the critical generational characteristics that participants described are primarily related to their preoccupation with technology. Lazy and a diminished work ethic are typical of this attitude. Robert illustrates this perspective.

[Technology’s] really convenient, but in a way, I feel like things like this make people lazy. 'Cause with the evolving technology, everybody just gets lazier and lazier. It takes so much more work out of everything. . . .

Everything’s just made so much easier, and I feel like it takes a lot away from people.

The participants acknowledge that they are not required to memorize facts, which contributes to their laziness. They recognize that they can easily “Google” any information they want at any time because the technology is at their fingertips. Therefore, they perceive that knowledge is easily and perpetually accessible. The merging of these dynamics creates a synergy that contributes to some participants’ perspective that the generation is less likely to work hard for their achievements. Lewis explains that his generation “wants a whole lot more without putting in the effort.” He indicates that he and his peers take short cuts in order to move ahead, which is dissimilar to prior generations. He stated, “I do not have the commitment that my dad had” because Lewis is able to take shortcuts because of the technology that is infused into his life.

Some perceive that they are connected, while others focus on the disconnections the technology fosters. Because of the availability of technology, particularly portable items and the Internet, some participants believe that contacts with others are maintained regardless of
physical location. Andrew brought his cell phone to the interview to represent his generation. His artifact is his "lifeline" to family and old and new friends. Furthermore, the available technology allows him to reconnect with the people in his life.

Contrarily, some participants, primarily from Liberal Arts University or from non-Caucasian backgrounds, suggest that the technology is a hindrance that diminishes relationships. Virginia, for example, recognizes that members of her generation are able to access technology easily. Yet, she is concerned about the effect the gadgets seem to have on her generation. "Social capital is low now. . . . [We’re] disenchanted 'cause we don’t really know each other very well. . . . Sometimes I wonder if people really want to. If people are just happy with not really knowing each other. . . . We care less about our personal relationships with people." The two perceptions are distinctly divergent. Thus, from a collective perspective, the group is heterogeneous and conflicted. Furthermore, they disagree on the significance of the symbol. On the one hand, Andrew represents the group who perceive the usefulness of technology, particularly with personal relationships. Virginia voiced the opposing collective concern that interpersonal relationships are stymied from its use.

Open-mindedness. For some, the diversity within the generation and their perceived open-mindedness are definitive characteristics of the generation, especially in contrast to preceding generations. They recognize diversity as encompassing race, class, and sexual orientation and also highlighted their ability to interact with their peers who may be dissimilar. Furthermore, participants are proud of their willingness to accept differences. Robert specifically compared his generation with his parents. He stated:
We’ve very open-minded about things. I know when I talk to my parents about things, they don’t want to accept a lot of things that differ away from what they’ve accepted their whole life. . . . At least my experience of the youth that I’ve been around in my generation, for the most part, they’re very open-minded about things. They’re open to accept another . . . view on something compared to just shunning it off and moving away, which is sort of why I say that it might be something good that our generation might have the possibility to make some sort of significant difference.

Pat also perceives his generation to be more open. He indicated that his generation is not “stuck in only one way of doing things,” and they are willing to alter their viewpoints. The participants appreciate flexibility among their peers. Yet, they imply that individuals outside their generation do not share similar values. Even though the participant touted the openness they perceive in their generation, a few participants do not share this perspective and are critical of the values espoused by their peers regarding diversity. These individuals do not concede that society or their generation has wholeheartedly embraced diversity. Wayne, for example, described the emphasis that he understands related to diversity in the United States, and the biases that still exist.

It’s an odd conflict that I feel. . . . I feel like a lot of people in our country tell us that diversity is good. America is a melting pot; we’re all told that from a small age, and it’s good. But at the same time we always, we all grow up with prejudices of different groups. And, you know, there’s a conflict there. But, you know, we meet individual people and that’s how the conflicts spread or doesn’t. . . . I don’t know, prejudices can be exacerbated or inhibited based on
an individual. But I mean, we’re always all taught, and maybe outwardly, we
give the appearance of being accepting, but.

Wayne’s perspective about diversity encapsulates the varying perspectives expressed by the participants.

Finally, some participants describe their generation as loud, outspoken and opinionated. For them, the ability to freely express their viewpoint and the willingness to listen to contrasting perspectives epitomize their generation. Sharon stated that they are “not afraid to . . . say how you feel.” Lydia commented, “Having seen people that . . . thought one-way and are willing to listen to other people’s opinions” is positive. For some, such as Sharon, these traits relate to their belief that some members of their generation are open-minded and that they value diversity. For others, like Lydia, they utilize their voice to both challenge the status quo and contribute their divergent viewpoints to dialogue that may have various perspectives.

On the one hand, many of the participants recognize that their generation has been exposed to and are more open to diverse groups. For these participants, they appreciate living in a society where they feel accepted, particularly by their peers. However, other participants have observed or acknowledge personal prejudices. The participants that believe their values are in conflict with diversity expectations and feel pressure externally to conform; they do not perceive that their values are accepted equally.

Societal contributors. Participants explained that their generation thinks independently and are motivated to advance societal change. Rashi states, “Our generation has their freedom to think. . . . They have their freedom to choose what they would want to do, and um, what their career paths are. What their educational goals are. Anything. They
have their will.” Even though participants perceive these characteristics of their generation, this viewpoint is perhaps more indicative of the age of the participants rather than unique to their generation. Virginia, for example, acknowledges that prior generations have contributed to the current climate in the United States. She explains, “There are a lot of freedoms afforded to us that haven’t been in the past. Mainly because . . . the generations before us brought along a lot of the sexual revolution and, like, Vietnam.” In addition, Virginia suggests that at as they approach young adulthood her generation is able make similar contributions for future generations. She explains, “We’re starting to care more about the world. And, then just with the whole go green, and all of that. We’re caring about the future, and about making sure that the world is a better place.” Virginia acknowledges that each generation has issues to address that are situated within the time period and that these lead to advances that contribute to future generations.

Contributing societally is particularly important to the men in the study. Although unsure of his specific path, Robert indicates that he wants to be “the type of person that actually makes a change.” Even though this aspiration is a priority for Robert, he feels that not all members of his generation are as ambitious. He explained his disappointment.

I feel like people need to start paying attention to real problems in the world and actually try to make a change. But, I feel like people are so caught up in what they’re living. They just make it for themselves and not worry about other people. That’s where they are.

Indeed, most participants suggest that contributing to change and thinking independently is a trait of their generation and have illustrated their contributions through the last national
election cycle; yet they concede that prior generations have made similar contributions, and thus, this trait is not unique to this generation.

**Narcissism.** Participants, primarily the seniors, described their generation as narcissistic, which includes being selfish and believing that everything is "all about me." For some, the narcissism is a byproduct of their fast-paced lifestyle because they are accustomed to instant access to information, constant stimulation, and their focus is primarily inward. The merging of these dynamics contributes to some of the participants' myopic tendencies. Bill, for example, describes this interplay in his generation related to their interaction with the world. They are "obsessed with instant entertainment and instant stuff." Furthermore, Lori eloquently described the narcissism she has observed in her generation that has been perpetuated by the messages parents have parted toward their generation.

- We are kind of selfish. We seem to be more focused on how this affects me.
- This is all about me. It's also, oh, we're all so special. Everybody has to get a trophy for participating in whatever sport or whatever. It's more coddling, I guess, than previous generations where it was like, the best is the best is the best. We're not about, concerned about making us feel better.

The narcissism described by the participants is attributed to the prevalent use of technology; living in an instantaneous world, and due to the messages this generation has received during their youth. Through these three factors participants perceive that they are recognized for their involvement rather than their accomplishments.

The descriptors the participants specified about their generation overlap with some of the characteristics—special, confident, and achieving—that Howe and Strauss (2000) proposed. However, the participants characterize the generation as more heterogeneous.
Although Howe and Strauss described the Millennial generation as merely having positive characteristics, the participants attribute both positive and negative characteristics to themselves and their peers. Their conceptualization implies that a broadened definition of the generation may be warranted. Furthermore, the potential for diversity within each generation is suggested and caution should be exercised when examining narrow generational definitions.

**Millennials and Their Peers**

Throughout, I have postulated that generations are more varied than generational theorists have suggested. Therefore, I asked participants to provide insight as to whether their attitudes and values are similar or dissimilar to their peers. Even though they initially declared one or the other viewpoint, their descriptions became muddled the more they explained. Holding the status of college student or of being peers did not signify that similar attitudes are shared.

**Peers.** In general, participants specified that their attitudes coalesced with their friends rather than their peers, college classmates or the entire generation. The participants define their peers in three distinct ways: friends who share values and attitudes, classmates and acquaintances, and members of their generation. Furthermore, the participants are able to relate to their peers in the first two categories and have difficulty relating to their entire generation as their peers. They indicated that their values are compatible with their friends, and therefore these relationships develop. However, the participants recognize that members of their generation do not all share the same value systems.

The particular value that creates the commonality in their friendships appears to relate to the personal attributes that the individual prioritizes. Colin, for example, indicated that his
friends were “on the same page” in terms of pursuing a path that will be fulfilling. Contrarily, he described some of his peers as “just want[ing] to make money.” He reflected about his friends, “Maybe because we are like-mined people and that is why we are friends.” His insight is noteworthy. However, it raises the question: Do people select friends because they identify values and attitudes that are similar, or do people become friends as they discover that they have values and attitudes that are alike, or some combination? Regardless, participants acknowledge differences between generational peers, in general, who may share a common experience, and a peer that is a part of the participant’s social network. Lewis eloquently illustrates this viewpoint. He stated:

It depends on how, how I define my peer. . . . My peer on an individual level, I would say, it’s probably not too different. I can have conversations like this with, with lots of people that are my peers on an individual level. I think when you move past individual with a collective level, as far as like, collective consciousness of my peers. I don’t think this would represent them. . . . I think individual yes, but not as a whole”.

These distinctions in peer group relationships further confirms that a generation is more complex than has previously been considered and that a common experience is limiting and does not provide the foundation for collective thought patterns.

**Values.** The other meaningful area that determines whether participants’ believe they are similar or dissimilar to their peers relates to their individual value systems. These differences may be apparent throughout all of the values, confined to some areas, or subtler. Moreover, the values that they discussed were both social and individual. Cassandra, for example, believes her attitudes are similar “to certain peers, certainly, and to others, not so
much.” She has classmates who are less motivated, but she boasts that her college peers are very serious about their academics due to the institution they attend. Similarly, Cassandra indicates that her hall mates are all close to their families, in the same way that she is. Yet, she feels very different from her peers religiously. Cassandra explained that she is conservative; her religion is extremely important to her, but some of her peers “do not uphold . . . to be morally sound in certain areas.” Therefore, she feels dissimilar, at least in this realm.

Religion and political affiliation generates more noticeable points of discord. Lydia explains, “I feel like there’s always this divide between people that are religious and people that are non-religious, and between people that are liberal and conservative.” Lydia, specifically, feels caught in this tension because she is conservative religiously and politically liberal. Furthermore, participants who described their religion or political affiliation to be a significant facet of their life identified more instances of dissonance with their peers. Ella, for example, is guided by her religious upbringing, which includes being reflective and altruistic. Conversely, she perceives that her peers are focused on materialism and self-promotion. She stated, “I live in the me generation. It’s very much, like, everybody look at me, and not me within myself”.

Participants expressed a full range of responses about whether or not their attitudes were similar or dissimilar to their peers. Distinctions were made regarding the closeness of the relationship or if their values were in conflict with their peers. Participants felt more similar to their friends than their collective peer group, and even less similar to their entire generation. Values of a higher priority to the person emerged as an area that engenders more noticeable differences between the participant and their peers. Merely being a member of a
group with a common experience, such as a college student, does not provide the participants with a foundation to define an identity for their generation.

Generational Perceptions

In addition to the participants’ definitions of their generation, I sought to understand their perceptions about being a member of a generation. In contrast to the participants’ perceptions about their generation, their observations about how they believe they are perceived by other generations is less optimistic and appears to expose the clashes that seem to occur naturally as differences develop across age groups. They are unclear about the societal expectations that await them and are expected to fulfill collectively. Furthermore, the participants portray other generations as interconnected. They recognize the gaps that occur between generations because of value differences.

Perceptions of Millennials

The participants’ awareness of other generations’ perceptions of them is consistent with some of their own definition and in other ways different. Primarily, participants referenced older generations as the source of these perceptions because they believe the younger generation has not been alive long enough to have developed a viewpoint. The perceptions are chiefly negative and not complimentary of the generation, and seem to stem from the dissimilarities that become apparent between generations. Not surprisingly, differences in the use of technology, particularly related to communication styles and usage patterns, were referenced.

Identifiable differences. Identifiable differences seem to be at the crux of differentiating one generation from the next. For some, this transition occurs with all generations and is not unique to the Millennials. Robert stated, “The younger generation
always gets looked down upon. 'Cause they're always different than the older generations. So, I feel like it [is] something that’s not necessarily going to differ from the past.” Even though Robert categorized this process as one-directional and focused on differences, Karen perceives more subtleties. She explained, “Sometimes there is a lack of understanding about what’s different. And like, how there are still similarities between what’s happening now and what was going on then, even if it’s hard to see. And that goes both ways.” Karen highlighted the tendency for members of different generations to focus their attention on dissimilarities rather than commonalities. For example, all generations that are entering young adulthood share a common experience of making decisions about their potential careers even though the opportunities may differ and their long-term commitment to a particular career path may be divergent. However, the literature about generations and the workforce focuses on differing expectations and work ethic (Bartley, Ladd, & Morris, 2007; Gordon & Steele, 2005; Zemke, Raines, & Filipiczak, 2000). Karen’s insight suggests that members of each generation could learn about the career decision-making process instead of merely examining differences that occur in the workplace. Older generations might gain insight about transient careers, and younger generations might learn about company loyalty.

Identifiable differences are particularly apparent with the use of technology. Ella explained that it is not the technology, per say, but rather a “lack of understanding between communication styles.” Members of each generation share the same access to the latest technologies. However, members within each generation may feel more comfortable with a technology that is familiar. For instance, there are multiple avenues for dialogue—face-to-face, telephone conversations, texting, social media, etc. The participants seem to believe that members from older generations have pre-established means of communication, and
therefore their willingness to modify and change patterns, for many, is less pliable.

However, as members of younger generations are developing their communication patterns, they are exposed to newer communication mediums through technology, which they may deem preferable and that create an identifiable difference. Perceptions about each generation are then formulated based on these differences, even though the reality for individuals within a generation can differ. Many participants clarified that they do not subscribe to the same priorities related to technology as they perceive is expected of their generation. For instance, some participants believe that members of their generation are overly involved with social media and elect to minimize their usage patterns. However, most participants described their generation as accomplished with current technologies and older generations resistant.

**Negative characteristics.** Characteristics of the generation that they perceive older generations view as negative of them are included in the category of identifiable differences. Similar to their own definition, participants, specifically those from higher socioeconomic status and Caucasian, believe that they are perceived as narcissistic and lazy. For them, this characterization equates to being spoiled and selfish. Heather, for example, described her experience with a patient at a local nursing home where she volunteers. Her patient believes she is “spoiled because I had the opportunity to play sports and go to college. Wear pants instead of dresses all the time.” Heather believes this perception stems from resistance to change. She infers that as newer generations have opportunities that were not available to prior generations and that members of the older generation are not always accepting of changing social norms. Moreover, this example illuminates the divides that form as shifts in social norms occur over time. Furthermore, Heather suggests that older generations perceive younger generations to take for granted or not acknowledge their previous struggles.
Participants, particularly from Research University, perceive that they are described as wild, rambunctious, and fast. Rashi believes these perceptions are formed because of the freedoms and opportunities that have become available to younger people, such as educational goals or career opportunities. Like Heather, she perceives that older generations do not believe that her generation has earned these new freedoms and opportunities, and therefore the younger generation is not appreciative of the sacrifices made by previous generations. This awareness is particularly meaningful and illustrates my earlier contention. As individuals recognize differences that emerge between people, particularly those in different age groups, fissures develop and become the identifiable differences that begin to define different generations.

Moreover, some participants recognize the identifiable differences related to their limited life experience. Many of the seniors and participants from Research University, believe that they are perceived to be untested and naïve. Karl explained that other generations believe his generation has, “a lot to learn. There are just little, like, lessons that we don’t understand, like hard work. . . . It’s hard for my generation to really understand about what suffering really is.” Diane further emphasized this perception. She stated, “Other generations think that we, um, we don’t know what we are doing.” A continuum of life experiences and exposure to the world is a part of the human condition and will remain a fundamental difference that will distinguish youth from elders.

Positive characteristics. Contrarily, some participants perceive that other generations recognize their potential to make significant societal contributions or change the political landscape. Lydia explained, “They perceive my generation as really capable” and smart. For some, this potential manifests through their willingness to address issues ignored
by prior generations. Craig believes he is perceived as "more willing to change things" because of his concern for the environment.

The participants’ definition and their perceived perceptions from other generations overlap in a few areas. However, the messages that the participants interpret from other generations are often in direct conflict and inconsistent, which further supports the contention that generations are complex. The participants believe that other generations perceive them from more negative ways than they would self-proclaim. Identifiable differences, primarily through their life experiences and opportunities appear to create markers that distinguish one generation from another. The participants suggest that the older generations are concerned that youth are not appreciative or do not acknowledge that the opportunities or resources have been created because of their prior contributions.

**Societal Expectations**

Primarily, societal attitudes and expectations have been at the core of generational descriptions. Therefore, I hoped the participants’ beliefs about societal expectations for them would provide some insight about their generation. The participants, in general, have an awareness of some of the societal expectations of and for them, although a few are uncertain. Further distinctions were made between the expectations they believe society anticipates of them as individuals and expectations of the entire generation or collectively. Collective societal expectations are those that the participants believe the current youth generation is expected to achieve as responsible citizen and are imposed by society in general. Individual expectations correspond to the values and attitudes the participants prioritize and are intertwined with their future aspirations.
Most participants articulated that they believe society expects them to become successful and contribute to society. The focal point for participants seems to be related to the degree to which they are grounded in their own values and beliefs or if they are still exploring, clarifying and relying on external influences. Lewis, for example, distinguishes between societal expectations, which are dissimilar, and the similarities he shares with some societal subsets. He explained:

I guess we would have to have a working definition of what society we were talking about. I think that my interests are dissimilar from the people that are currently possessing power. . . . I guess I have two approaches. My first approach . . . would be society at large. I don’t think my ideas necessarily reflect society at large. . . . I think people are preoccupied with a whole host of other things, entertainment things. . . . On a smaller level, I think certain segments in society would benefit that would be in tune and would agree with the same things I’m saying. So, I would say at large no, but there are localized populations that I think would agree.

Lewis adds that he is unable to identify the smaller populations that would concur with his perspective because the smaller groups do not have one identity and would be determined by each individual interaction. Lewis has a well-defined understanding of himself and the values that guide his life. However, he does not have confidence that his peers have a similar perspective. “It’s not like all college students think these type[s] of thoughts.” Lewis’ identification and delineation between society at large and subgroups—collective and individual—is important to the generational discussion. This distinction
illustrates heterogeneity within a generation, which is often ignored by the generational depictions.

The participants describe interplay and degrees to which they believe the perceived collective and individual expectations apply to them. Many participants prioritize their personal values and beliefs rather than rely on the perceived societal expectations, and do not feel compelled to conform. Kristy’s values are aligned with the values she believes society expects of her, except they are occurring in a non-sequential manner. She specifically described her pathway in relation to her family. Kristy stated, “I didn’t go marriage, child. . . . You know, college, marriage . . . child and so forth. . . . I went college, child, and marriage whenever it comes.” She believes that her generation has merely altered the sequence of these events.

Allen, on the other hand, rejects the collective expectations. He explained that his father and society expect him to find a job with a corporation and become a part of a consumer-based society. However, Allen’s feels that he is “the antithesis of societal expectations” specifically because one of his priorities is to consume less. Therefore, he does not feel obligated to work for a corporation and has elected to pursue his life in alignment with his values.

For some participants more subtleties exist between the collective and individual expectations. Cassandra, for example, concurs that society wants her to be educated and successful. Furthermore, she believes that tolerance is valued by society. Yet, she personally disagrees with “other lifestyles, other religions, [and] other beliefs” and does not feel obligated to alter her perspective.
Even though some participants have individual values that align with societal expectations, they recognize that not all members of their generation will have the same priorities. Karen describes her attitudes as “traditional” and “hetero-normal.” However, she recognizes that her gay friends will have a different experience because she believes society expects heterosexual relationship primarily. Her acknowledgement of these relationship differences illustrates that societal expectations are not applicable in all situations. Andrew, who is gay, shares this perspective. He stated that his attitudes are “pretty close” to society’s expectations. Even though Andrew believes he is supported as—man, husband, adopted kids, and a career—some apprehensions are still evident.

It’s just hard to realize that society isn’t exactly looking for man and husband. But knowing what I’m doing is still right, still acceptable by most people in society, even though it’s not the first thing they think of. It’s still there in people’s minds and knows that it exists and people are okay with it.

Some participants, however, expressed confusion about the expectations society has of them. Bill, for example, believes that societal expectations are contradictory. At one of the spectrum, the media portrays a wealthy “playboy lifestyle” that he interprets should be integrated into his life aspirations. Meanwhile, he understands that society requires him to be grounded and responsible. Bill feels torn between these two extremes that both “glorifies them and condemns” both paths. This conundrum leaves him unsure about the proper life course to pursue.

Not all participants are distressed by what society expects or are puzzled by the messages they receive from society. Sam, for example, is not “particularly compelled by”
society. He has not considered what society might expect of him, nor is he concerned about any potential implications for his generation.

In general, the participants understand that societal expectations exist that they are expected to fulfill. However, these expectations do not appear to define the participants or guide their life decisions. Some participants acknowledge that their attitudes and beliefs correspond with collective societal expectations, but not in all aspects of their lives; whereas others are not concerned with the expectations they perceive from society and recognize that individual experiences within the generation are likely to vary. Their individual attitudes and values are of greater importance than the collective expectations they perceive from society. Therefore, individual values and attitudes should be incorporated more significantly into generational definitions.

Based on the participants’ responses, a consistent viewpoint about their generation is not apparent based on definitions of the generation, the perceived perception from other generations, or the absence of any influence of societal expectations. This observation conflicts with commonly held generational understandings. Individual values and priorities continue to guide the participants rather than a collective understanding emerging. Furthermore, heterogeneity continues to surface throughout the participants’ perceptions.

**Millennial Perceptions of Other Generations**

The generational literature suggests that societal attitudes towards age groups contribute to the definition of a generation. Therefore, I hoped by understanding the participants’ perceptions of other generations, insight would be gained about the nature of a generation. Participants suggest that within each generation priorities and values vary, and therefore, many were hesitant to generalize about other generations. Some specified that all
generations share similarities and that “gaps” form based on two primary differences—the priorities of the time and the issues that younger generations undervalue. Participants conveyed a clearer description of older generations and primarily referenced the Baby Boomers. The description for younger generations was blurred; the participants feel that they had not yet developed a persona.

Several participants rejected the notion that a generation can be simplified into a few defining characteristics. Robert, for example, believes that all generations possess individual differences. He specified that within a generation individuals both exemplify and diverge from the characteristics associated with that generation. Sam believes that everyone has “a certain amount of similarities and a certain amount of differences” and, therefore he had difficulty describing “an entire undifferentiated mass of people.” Robert and Sam’s perspectives highlight that an oversimplification of any group of people minimizes the nuances among the group, which seems to have occurred with current generational characterizations.

Generation gaps. As changes between generations become evident, members discover that their experience differs from what they perceive others to prioritize. As evidenced though the participants’ descriptions, not all members of any generation will have the same priorities. These “gaps” that the participants recognize are more apparent when age differences exist. Technology usage is an obvious example with the Millennials. Pat imagines that “other generations think we are crazy involved with technology,” which is different than when older generations were at a similar stage in their life. He believes that, in turn, older generations are less able to relate to the current priorities of the Millennial generation, particularly related to technology usage. Ella believes that the differences are not
because of the use of technology, per se, but rather a “lack of understanding between communication styles” which in turn creates a divide or a “gap.” Penny’s experience with her parents illustrates this. Her parents frequently explain to her that she spends too much time on Facebook or Twitter, and they only discuss the negative aspects that might occur as a result. Meanwhile, she perceives her use of these mediums as a means to maintain relationships with her peers. Her parents utilize different resources to maintain their relationships, and therefore, a gap is exposed.

The gaps appear to be related to the prevailing cultural context during which each generation develops. The Millennials have been raised during an era of immense technological change. Although there have been other historical eras of vast technological change, such as the industrial revolution, the cultural context for the Millennials is that the technology is readily accessible and intended for personal use. During the industrial revolution, the technological advancements streamlined the production of goods, which impacted society. Therefore, the prevailing cultural context appears to influence each generation’s reaction to the shifts that are currently occurring.

Allen further explained that each generation has “slightly different values,” which are grounded in the priorities of the generation or what they “take for granted.” Allen infers that as individuals experience the world they are unable to recognize the opportunities that they have been afforded because of prior generations. Therefore, the people who experience the prior problem desire some acknowledgement of the progress they have contributed to society; again creating a “gap.” It seems that as a society, it is easier for individuals to recognize the differences between groups rather than similarities. Karen indicated that “there
are more similarities than people notice” and that the gaps become apparent as there is “a lack of understanding about what’s different.”

Even though participants frequently cited the “gaps” between generations, some acknowledge the interconnectedness of generations and praised the opportunities each provides the other. Heather explained that she and her father, who is in his early 60s, are similar and interconnected. She emphasizes the synergy and synchronicity that develops between generations even though priorities differ.

They are not any worse, and we’re not any better than them. They were us. They’re just getting older. . . . I don’t think age is anything to be . . . I don’t think we should hate on them just because they’re older. If anything we should thank them because they enabled us to be so powerful. They are the reason we are here. . . . I don’t think any generation can be any better than anyone. I think it’s all a progression. They open doors for us. We open doors for them. The generation after me, my kids, my grandkids, they will keep doing things, and it’s just, is just like another stage. No one is better.

Many of the participants described the apparent “gaps” between generations. Yet, some suggest that the hard distinctions between generations that have previously been envisioned are imprecise and the generations are interconnected and are continually being shaped.

**Older generations.** Participants were able to discern characteristics of older generations more readily than the younger generation. The older generations were often identified as Baby Boomers, parents, or grandparents although the descriptions for each were similar. Participants admire their wisdom and strong work ethic, but criticized their ability to
adapt to change and their conservative stance. Furthermore, the participants' perspective varied regarding the narcissism apparent in older generations.

Participants respect the intelligence and wisdom of the older generations. Cassandra specified that younger people should rely on their elders for advice more frequently because of their vast experience in the world. Furthermore, participants appreciated the work ethic of the older generation, and believe that this value has vanished amongst their peers. Lydia commented, “My generation is not always about the same work ethic that other generations are.” Each of these positive aspects regarding the older generation has been acknowledged as missing from the current youth generation. However, the participants suggest that wisdom and intelligence are typically gained through maturity.

The participants indicate that the older generations are more conservative and are less adept to change concurrently. This stance seems to be centered on social issues and technology. Diane described her grandparents as, “Conservative. They’re not open-minded at all with the new things that are emerging in this world.” Several participants described the older generation’s reluctance to incorporate technology into their lives. Lewis illustrates this perspective by describing the perceptions he has about the three generations older than he.

The older generation don’t have, really see, a need for all this technology. . . . I’m thinking of my grandma. . . . She doesn’t know how to use it. She’s not interested in knowing how to use it. I think the generation separating my parents and my grandparents from myself. . . . I think they’re on the cusp of where they, they could remember when the computer wasn’t in the household. They can remember that and benefited from it to some degree. But at the
same time, I think they’re young enough still where they know how to access it. And they benefit from it as well.

The negative aspects of the older generations described are specifically related to the topic that is of prominence to the participants as they understand their generation. Therefore, the changes observed seem to be an obvious focal point for the participants to recognize differences that emerge between the generations and are more apparent than the aspects of each generation that overlap.

Similar to the current youth generation, participants’ suggest that the narcissism in older generations falls on a continuum. Ella specified that her parents were a part of the “me generation,” but they have since been required to change their focus as they have aged. Contrarily, Chad discussed his respect for older generations because, “I see a lot of people who did the right thing, and were a lot less focused on themselves.” Although narcissism about the Millennials has been depicted from a negative standpoint, Ella and Chad’s descriptions suggest the potential for the viewpoint to evolve as the generation matures.

Even though the participants’ description of older generations is more developed, a varied perspective about the characteristics of the generations was described. Furthermore, participants highlighted both similarities and differences between and among the generations. The differences, particularly between age groups, seem more apparent and are recognized as “gaps” that develop amid generations due to the cultural context of their generation.

**Younger generations.** Even though participants were more hesitant in their description of the younger generation, the group following the Millennials was often portrayed as similar to themselves. Descriptors included spoiled, open-minded, less innocent, and yearning for the freedom that result with maturity.
Participants that perceive the younger generation as similar to them suggest that similar societal issues, such as fragmented families and increased exposure to subjects that may not be age appropriate, continue, and the younger generation is experiencing situations that are similar to the Millennials. Maureen specified, “They’re growing up without that innocence. They’re being able to see a lot more violence and just harshness than before”.

Rashi, who has a sister in middle school, has a similar perception. Yet, she contends that the younger generation is “waiting to experience that freedom or maybe they’re experiencing it a little early.” Therefore, the younger generation is sharing a similar path as the current generation. Rashi has witnessed the downfall this aggressive exposure to aspects of life that may not be age appropriate for her own generation. However, the exposure that today’s youth is experiencing also has positive outcomes specifically related to their openness to diverse people and ideas. Indu incredulously described her observation of a three year old who was able to tell her friend about a website including the URL address. Their technological exposure is expected to provide greater access to knowledge and information, which Indu believes will provide opportunities for the younger generations to be more open to other perspectives. She stated that they have an “understanding [of] different cultures” and specified Islam, religion, sexual orientation and demographic differences that are not as apparent with older generations.

The interplay of these dynamics has not materialized completely. Yet, the participants suggest that the younger generation will have a similar experience to theirs. The primary differences between the two generations are related to the youth’s exposure to the world at an earlier age than the participants’ recall, which may create overexposure or allow
them to examine the world with additional knowledge, understanding and acceptance of others.

**Conclusion**

The perceptions of the participants related to their observation of older generations, societal expectations of the Millennials, and their beliefs about the younger generations provide insight into the nature of a generation. Two concepts are particularly noteworthy. First, similarities and differences exist within and among all generations. Yet, most generational definitions have only examined the *homogeneity among* and the *heterogeneity between*, and have neglected the other aspects, which seem to be critical in order to develop an accurate understanding of any generation. Furthermore, generation gaps occur as priorities shift and younger generations undervalue societal progress that older generations helped to cultivate. As generational members identify the changes and understand an experience that was previously different, the gaps between generations develop. The subject matter that contributes to the gaps is not consistent and appears to be related to issues that are relevant to the individual, the cultural context, and the focal points of the developing youth generation.

Previous generational conceptualizations have focused on one aspect of a generation, societal. Yet, a generation is multidimensional and cannot be understood by any of the aspects individually. The participants' perceptions lack group consistency in the personal and societal attributes along with their understanding of a generation. These group inconsistencies are important to acknowledge as generations are described. However, they have been mainly ignored in the past. We minimize that value of all generations by
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excluding the prominent and subtle differences that are apparent in and among all generations.

**Howe and Strauss Reexamined**

Howe and Strauss (2000) postulated that the Millennial generation is defined by merely seven persona characteristics—special, conventional, pressured, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, and achieving. However, the participants in this study share a more varied depiction of the generation. The participants consistently concur that their generation is pressured and achieving. They adamantly disagree that they are special and conventional. With the remaining characteristics, the participants agree and disagree with components of each.

**Special**

Howe and Strauss’ (2000) description of special stems from the attention this generation has received from the media, the care and attention parents have given to raising their children, and the collective messages conveyed that this generation is crucial to the nation. However, the participants had several reactions to the characteristic special. Overwhelmingly, most disagreed with Howe and Strauss’ premise and many interpreted the designation as a negative trait. Others accepted the term but defined its meaning according to a projected future rather than the generation’s past upbringing.

The participants’ understanding of the term special is conceptualized in three primary ways. First, they specify that each generation rises to the current issues of their time, and therefore, each generation is consider special. Next, the participants consider special from a psychological construct. Their parents intentionally focused on their individuality, which
contributes to the narcissism in their generation. Last, the participants link the term special with the advantages they have had through technology and educational opportunities.

Most participants reacted to the special characterization by specifying that they did not view their generation as superior than any other generation, which is implied by Howe and Strauss’ depiction. Instead, they explained that all generations are special and have some uniqueness associated with them. Cassandra explained, “I think that every generation is special as to what is going on in the world... It all depends on what’s happening currently... I wouldn’t say that necessarily we’re more special than other generations.” Furthermore, the participants suggested that the social climate influences the priorities of the generation rather than generations being different. Diane suggested that given similar circumstances members of other generations would react similarly to the social environment. She stated, “We’re special, but I don’t know that we’re that much different. I feel like if my parents were in my shoes, I think they would be doing the same thing”.

Cassandra and Diane imply that differences observed between generations are primarily a reflection of the current opportunities and priorities that are available. The youth of the time are merely utilizing the current resources available rather than any systemic differences between individuals in different generations. The participants infer that members of older generations would interact similarly with the world and their peers if the social climate were similar during their youth. The participants recognize that societal progression occurs and that during any specific period of time individuals and collective groups are poised to contribute as needed or as appropriate. Chad, for example, explained that, “the World War II generation... change[d]... views on occupation[s] with women entering the workplace.” Although the participants do not view their generation as very different from
other generations, they highlighted that within a generation some individuals have unique qualities and traits. Lewis specified, "I feel like everybody’s special. I don’t think that represents us."

Some participants concur with Howe and Strauss (2000) that throughout their youth the message that they are special has been conveyed by adults, however they do not believe the term accurately reflects the generation. They described the negative ramifications of such a message. Colin is conflicted with the message that he has been told and his current perspective about himself. "We’ve, kind of, grown up being told that we are special . . . But, I’m not. . . . It’s, kind of, tough to be told you are special, and you’re a great person and you’re going to do things. And then, realize, no you’re not." In addition to parents and teachers conveying to the participants that they are special, the media has contributed. Karl explained that his generation grew up with Barney, a popular children’s television show that emphasized individual accomplishments. Nevertheless, he does not believe that his generation has achieved anything remarkable and cannot be classified as special.

Similarly, through her formative school years, Judith has observed the consequences of continual praise of her classmates. She stated, "Everybody has to get the trophy, and it is not just about the best is the best. Everybody had to be special." As a result, Judith believes that members of her generation require constant recognition for everything they attempt, whether successful or not, which has negative connotations for the generation. For some, the desire for constant recognition continues. Bill thinks that his generation has a "really high opinion of ourselves." He believes that through the use of Facebook his peers continue to be self-focused. He explained that many of his peers frequently post everything they are doing on Facebook, which he feels "is narcissistic to put all that on there." Although he admits that
he is not immune, he tries to be more grounded than he observes his generation. Even though some participants acknowledge that they have been viewed and applauded as special, they currently cannot imagine that they will be able to fulfill this characterization. Instead, the participants recognize negative ramifications of being touted as special.

In some instances, the participants concur that the term special does apply to their generation. However, they explain the definition differently than Howe and Strauss (2000). For them, special is defined as being unique due to the privileges and opportunities they have been afforded, primarily through their generations' increased access to education and technology. Even though Sharon acknowledges that some people in the generation are not able to attend college, she believes that more people have the opportunity now than previously, which is different than prior generations.

As has been discussed throughout, technology continues to permeate the participants’ conception of their generation. They believe that their use of technology is different from any prior generation and contributes to their access to the world. For Ella, the technology serves as a “supplement,” which provides her generation “the ability to maybe look deeper into history and draw from it.” She implies that prior generations have not had the same access to historical information, and therefore could not be as reflective or build upon the knowledge they can access.

Furthermore, some participants believe that technology has been directed toward their generation, and therefore they feel distinct. Bill, for example, stated, “We love technology. It’s ours. . . . It’s growing up with us, you know. It’s being made by people older than us; targeted at us.” Some participants concede that their generation has advantages that were not available for older generations, and that, in some instances; their generation is the focal point,
particularly related to media culture. However, the participants’ interpretation of the infusion of technology is not that they are special; instead they have merely taken advantage of an opportunity that lies in front of them.

Similar to Howe and Strauss (2000), the participants concur that their generations has the potential to contribute positively to society, even though they are not certain of the specifics. Many participants stipulate that this quality is not unique to just their generation; however, some suggest that they might have greater potential than prior generations. Karen reflected, “Although I don’t think we’ve done much, I think we probably have the potential to do things that are going to be helpful to our country.” For some, this potential is characterized by their ability to view situations from different perspectives. Kristy explained, “We all [generations] have something different to bring the table.... We’re so free to express ourselves.... It allows us to show others... different things that they may not have been able to... see.” Howe and Strauss’ projection that this generation will contribute something new is both expected from society and an aspiration of the participants. Perhaps this viewpoint is an outcome of the message of being special that they have received throughout their youth. Or it may represent optimism that tends to be more apparent with younger people.

The participants advocated that they are not more special than other generations and conceive the term differently than Howe and Strauss (2000) intended. The participants concur with Howe and Strauss that they have been touted as special and believe they will contribute positively in the future. Instead of the generation being special, the participants believe that they merely have opportunities that were not available to prior generations.
They believe they are overly applauded falsely, which contributes to narcissism within their generation and a need for continual praise.

**Conventional**

Howe and Strauss’ (2000) conventional description refers to their conclusion that this generation is more willing to accept their parents’ values than prior generations. Howe and Strauss purport that the generation takes pride in following rules and wants their behaviors to align with the expectations presented to them. However, the participants define the characteristic of convention in relation to social norms, varied lifestyles, and their prioritization of future values.

Similar to Howe and Strauss (2000), the personal attributes the participants’ defined and discussed overwhelmingly aligned with their familial values and they envision a future that mirrors their current family structure, financial background, and lifestyle. This aspect of their description of their generation suggests that conventional may be an accurate descriptor, even though the participants did not recognize that they were describing conventional values. Parents consistently were touted as the primary influence that has shaped their perceptions about the world rather than any external sources. However, the participants also recognize differences that they observe within and between generations.

Many of the participants were hesitant to describe their generation as conventional. Their discussion of the term tended to hone in on a particular facet of societal expectations rather than a broad view of the expectations that contribute to their generational definition. The participants who believe the descriptor applies observed that their peers, in general, do not question societal norms and are unquestioning followers. Bill, for example, suggests that, “there are a lot of people who like to do what the masses are doing.” Furthermore, many
suggested that collectively, they have not contributed anything of significance to society therefore they are following convention.

Yet, for some, this view of conventional is limiting because they see variations in the generation. Chad illustrates these nuances. He specified that everyone brushes their teeth, but some use Oral-B versus Colgate as a toothpaste. He implies that members of his generation may have similar goals and aspirations, but their route to fulfill these aspirations materializes differently. A few participants viewed their generation as conventional, but see themselves outside of the norm. Pat described the generation as “very banal”, but he prides himself for “break[ing] routine.”

The participants who challenge the conventional label specified that members of their generation have varied lifestyles and described futures that anticipate the changes they will contribute to society. Virginia adamantly disagrees that her generation is conventional because she celebrates the diversity of her generation. Furthermore, she feels confined by the limitations a traditional lifestyle would impose. She pointedly stated:

I don’t feel like there’s any form of conventionality . . . in my generation. I don’t think there’s a particular set lifestyle. . . . I couldn’t pinpoint a particular, ‘live your life a certain way’ lifestyle that everyone follows. They’re definitely like bandwidths of cultural lifestyles that are, kind of, big and have a wide following. I think that . . . brings people together. There are different niches. . . . There are just so many niches that I don’t think conventionality would be a particularly correct way to describe us.

Like Virginia, some participants, who question this description, are unable to reconcile other prominent characteristics of the generation that are in direct conflict with a conventional
label such as being open-minded or change-oriented. Penny specified, “It’s really hard to be unique and conventional at the same time.” She believes that her generation has a wide-array of interests, but concedes that, “Some things we do may be conventional” or expected.

For some, the term conventional conflicts with the participants’ vision for change. Participants highlighted their contributions in the last presidential election, and the perception that they led the country in a different direction because of the prominence of the youth vote. Lydia illustrates the generation focus on change. She views prior generations as conventional, and thinks of the 1950s “cookie-cutter” life when she envisions a conventional life. For her, she “sees differences, and I guess innovation rather than convention. Changing things and... trying to make things unique” for her generation.

Even though the participants do not embrace the conventional characterization as a general description about their generation, their depictions of the values and priorities that are important to them and their futures reflect patterns that are similar to their parents. However, they believe that some of their generational characterizations such as open-minded, diversity, and change-oriented directly conflict with a conventional description. Some feel constrained to comply with a conventional lifestyle. Indeed, they expect to put their stamp on the world, but ultimately they desire the stability and picturesque life that has been portrayed by society.

**Pressed**

Howe and Strauss’ (2000) indicate that this generation is pressured because they have been expected to work hard and capitalize on the advantages that are available to them. Parents have set high expectations for personal success and structured their children’s lives in order for them to be extremely involved. This generation has been expected to excel, yet
avoid taking personal risks. Howe and Strauss describe the Millennials as “trophy kids” that are often on display to others (p.44).

Of all the characteristics Howe and Strauss (2000) describe about the Millennial generation, participants were most likely to agree with the pressured characterization. According to Howe and Strauss, the generation is pressured due to external expectations imposed on them. Most of the participants concur that their parents, society and peers pressure them to be successful. They feel the greatest pressure associated with college admission, the imperative to create social change, and a successful post-graduation life. However, some have internalized the pressure and feel obligated to excel and achieve.

Similar to Howe and Strauss (2000), the participants’ feel pressure primarily from their elders. Rashi describes an omnipresent, invisible pressure that she always carries with her. She cites peers, family, teachers, and professors as contributors, which are often intertwined.

The participants have felt pressure related to the academic environment; specifically the intense competition to get into a college and to minimally obtain a college degree has been at the forefront for many. The participants believe that for them to meet societal expectations and be successful, they are required to go to college. Maureen explains, “I think society has slowly, like, grown . . . in a way that you need a college degree to live.” The participants believe that in order to be academically competitive with their peers, their credentials need to be exceptional. Indu indicates that good grades are no longer sufficient to be a successful college applicant. She believes that she was required to have an “amazing GPA . . . do all these extracurricular, and take APs [advanced placement classes]” or she would not have the opportunity to enroll in a good college. For Indu, a degree from a good
college will provide a foundation for her to be successful in other aspects of her future, such as financial stability.

Many of the participants believe they are obligated to improve the world socially. Diane stated, “We have pressure to, um, better the world . . . [To] excel even more than . . . the generation in power has.” The participants believe that changes must occur related to the environment, the economy, and our relations globally. The participants feel compelled to improve the current social climate and leave their country on more sound footing than they are currently experiencing. Indu explained, “I think this generation really needs to tackle [climate change]. Otherwise, the next generation will be even more pressured.” In a progressive society, the desire to build upon and improve society for the next generation is not unique. Yet, the participants consistently described this specific pressure related to issues they believe that prior generations have either been unable or unwilling to address.

Interestingly, many of the participants indicated that they were unclear about the specific expectations society has for them. However, they overwhelmingly feel pressure to reach, and perhaps exceed, the expectations they perceive have been set forth. They specify that they are expected to have a positive impact on society. Therefore, they acknowledge societal expectations for their generation to contribute to society, yet feel that the messages have not been clearly articulated.

Unlike Howe and Strauss (2000), a few participants described social pressures to achieve the lifestyle glamourized through the media. In addition to finding employment, Bill, a senior, also feels pressure “to be beautiful and rich, and charismatic” because of the media images that are marketed to the youth generation. Bill believes that most of these media images display lifestyles that are not achievable for the vast majority of society, yet he
feels he is expected to aspire to live these extravagant lifestyles. Furthermore, Ella describes the conflict that she perceives her generation has to reconcile related to the infiltration of the media and the unachievable messages that are conveyed. She states, “The generation on the whole feels the pressure to be like those people [stars], but there’s no concept that I can’t be those people. . . . Just like a perfect image that you really can’t necessarily live up to.” Bill and Ella recognize that these displayed lifestyles are outside of their reach, but they believe that their peers feel pressured to achieve these romanticized and idealized dreams.

Contrary to Howe and Strauss’ (2000) characterization, a few participants suggested that their generation is not pressured. However, they perceive that their peers create a “perceived pressure.” Lewis explains that his basic needs, such as food and shelter, are met and the other stressors are simply self-imposed. He explained that he was currently feeling pressure to complete a class paper. Even though he believes he as a sufficient amount of time to complete the project, he has delayed beginning the project because he has elected to pursue other priorities; therefore he created pressure for himself. Pat suggests that everyone experiences the basic stresses of life, but in reality, most people live “unfettered” because the majority of their needs are being provided for them. He believes that many of his peers self-impose a majority of their pressure or stress.

With few exceptions, participants concur with Howe and Straus (2000) that pressured is an appropriate descriptor of their generation. They feel pressure to succeed personally, advance society, particularly in aspects they perceive other generations have not been successful, and by the competitiveness they feel from their peers. For some, the external pressures heighten their individual expectations.
Sheltered

Howe and Strauss (2000) cite the changes in child rearing that began with greater attention to child abuse in the 1980's. They cite the dramatic increase in the number of child safety products that have been developed throughout this generations' youth as another contributor to a sheltered characterization. Furthermore, this generation experienced a number of school shootings during their youth, such as Columbine, which prompted precautionary safety measures in the academic setting. Howe and Strauss contend that the Millennial generation has been raised during “the most sweeping youth safety movement in American history” (p.43).

However, the notion that their generation is sheltered garnered a mixed reaction from the participants. Some agree with Howe and Strauss (2000); yet others feel they have been exposed to more violence, sexuality and hatred at younger ages than previous generations experienced primarily through the media. Another group of participants feel that fit of the characterization of sheltered depends on the individual.

Participants who concur with Howe and Strauss' (2000) characterization of sheltered suggest that they have not experienced any significant difficulties and live a privileged life. Participants acknowledged the advantages they are afforded by living in the United States, a developed, wealthy country. With greater access to world information, some participants recognize that there are situations globally and environments that are extraordinarily difficult compared to their specific circumstances. Ella, who receives need-based financial aid, explained that in many parts of the world people are starving and do not have shelter or clothing to wear. Comparably, she and her generation are protected and have privileges that are not available for everyone worldwide. Virginia illustrates this point. She has a friend
from Africa who stated, “Being poor here [in America] is amazing compared to a lot of places. . . . Being poor here is what others in Third world countries would wish to have.” Therefore, the participants value the opportunities they have been provided, and believe they have been protected from adversity that is experienced in other parts of the world.

A few participants contrasted their experience with the current wars and prior generations who were required to serve the military during wartime. Karen, who comes from a military family, reflected that with previous wars entire families were affected because “your brother or your uncle . . . was, like drafted and had no choice to go.” She acknowledges that with the current wars her generation is sheltered from the atrocities of war. As a result, her generation can choose their level of involvement, which is strikingly different than with older generations.

Some participants recognize that their parents have intentionally protected their children. Cassandra, for example, describes being sheltered as a child. She specifies that her parents sheltered her, in part, because she was raised in a Christian household and protecting children from the difficulties in the world align with the values that they prioritize. She states:

I think that comes with whatever belief system there is. That family is basing their lifestyle off of. If they’re basing it off a more conservative, they’re probably going to be more sheltered. But if they are more liberal, then it probably is going to be less, less sheltered.

Cassandra accepts the importance of her family value system, yet she also indicates that families that follow different values are likely to allow their children greater exposure to society and may not be sheltering their children.
In contrast, some participants believe that increased exposure to issues and images that are not age appropriate permeate their generation. They perceive that prior generations were protected from graphic media images that now are readily available. With increased access to instant information about any topic they desire, the participants do not view the Millennial generation as sheltered. As a result, they feel they are more aware of differences around the world than previous generations. However, a shortcoming of increased exposure is their desensitization to violence in the world. Maureen explained that even *People* magazine is filled with “traumatic stories . . . a lot more awareness of hate.” She feels that it is impossible to be protected from the everyday difficulties that people experience.

For some, they are aware of the differences between their family background and their generational peers. Wade, who receives need-based financial aid, described the differences between families that live in affluent versus poor neighborhoods and issues he connects to the person’s environment. He was surprised after he started college, “cause I met people who . . . haven’t seen any struggle. . . . And, I’m like, ‘Wow, you’re that naïve?’ Or your parents were able to keep you from it, like that. Whew. Wow!” Wade’s awareness is noteworthy. He infers that sheltered members of the generation hail from privileged backgrounds; more affluent families are afforded choices that are not similarly available for people from lower socioeconomic status. For some, college may be the catalyst for their awareness of social situations that are different from their childhood experience. That privilege contributes to an individual’s life experience is important to acknowledge as generational definitions are being formulated because society is filled with people from a broad array of socioeconomic backgrounds. Wade’s description highlights the existing
heterogeneity within the generation that contradicts the blanket characterization by Howe and Strauss (2000).

The participants’ reaction to the characterization of being sheltered provided limited consensus. The participants who believe their generation is sheltered recognize the privileged society they live in and have observed other atrocities worldwide. They support Howe and Strauss’ (2000) contention that their parents have protected them throughout their childhood, or they have not experienced hardship. Contrarily, other participants feel that their generation has been exposed to world issues primarily through the media, and they are aware of differences between their experiences and their generational peers.

**Confident**

Howe and Strauss’ (2000) confident depiction characterizes the generation as trusting in general because of their close relationships with their parents. They perceive the generation to be optimistic about their future, which translates into positive feelings about their contributions to the country. As a manifestation of this generational confidence, Howe and Strauss believe the generation brags about their influence and potential.

The participants concur with Howe and Strauss’ (2000) characterization that the generation is optimistic about their future. They believe in their ability to contribute positively to societal change. However, the participants are unsure if this attribute is a characteristic of their generation or merely confidence associated with youth, in general.

As evidenced throughout the participants’ description of their generation, they boast about their potential abilities. They consider their role in the 2008 presidential election to have been significant. They believe they are tasked with and will achieve changes related to the economy, the environment, and the direction of the country.
The facet that Howe and Strauss (2000) did not consider as they conceptualized the generation is whether or not confidence is merely related to being young or representative of this generation. Lydia stated, “I don’t know that that applies to my generation as much as any generation of decently young people. I feel like younger people are always going to be more optimistic and more confident; think that they can do anything.” Youth confidence is related to the participants’ belief that they are capable, and that they can still imagine their future potential. Many of the obstacles that people experience as they navigate through life have not yet stymied younger people. Therefore, they are still able to dream of possibilities. Chad explains, “[We are] confident in our productivity, our ability to achieve more than people of the past.”

The participants clarified that even though their generation is overly and outwardly confident, many believe that members of their generation have a public and private persona that can be in conflict. Penny specified:

I think we are . . . confident or we come off that way. What you do behind closed doors? You could be like a sissy . . . but I think we all try to come off as confident in some way, shape, or form.

As a result, some participants perceive that their peers doubt their abilities, lack self-esteem, and are unsure of their futures. Furthermore, at the onset of this study the generation was at the early stages of a country that has now experienced long-lasting economic and political difficulty, which has the potential to color their perspective. Many participants described apprehensions as they prepare to enter the workforce.

The participants agree with Howe and Strauss’ (2000) characterization that their generation has confidence, which is exemplified by their optimism about the future and their
potential to positively contribute to society. However, the participants indicate that their outward exuberance of confidence may not be internalized.

**Team-Oriented**

Howe and Strauss (2000) specify that the Millennial generation is team-oriented because of their exposure to group activities. School systems have adopted collaborative learning practices and emphasized participation in team sports. Therefore, Howe and Strauss believe that the generation has developed “team instincts” and have formed closer relationships with their peers (p.44).

The participants agree with Howe and Strauss (2000) that they have been involved with teams and required to complete group projects; yet, they specify that they prefer to work independently. Some believe the team aspect has the potential to assist globally; while others have observed their generational peers be selfish and prioritize their individual needs over the groups.

Participants cited sports teams and academic group work as specific examples of the teams that they have participated in during their youth. Bill explained, “We all played on teams when we grew up. And you work in teams on group projects in school.” Their collaboration in teams has not ceased. During college, Kristy has often formed study groups with classmates particularly if she is having difficulty with an assignment.

Participants who supported a team-oriented definition specified that they observed teamwork primarily related to social outcomes. Lydia believes that globalization is the epitome of working as a team. She contends that countries are required to work together currently in order to achieve. If countries fail to join together and compromise, they will not
be able to progress. Furthermore, many participants have observed their peers coalesce to benefit the needs of others during difficult circumstances.

However, many of the participants specified that they dislike being a member of a group. In part, their displeasure stems from the selfishness they have observed from their peers. Colin stated:

I don’t like teamwork. I have always hated, like, group work in any class or anything that I have had to do. . . . I have never met someone enthused in my generation to take part in a team activity.

Even though today’s youth has been required to participant in teams or groups, the participants do not believe that their peers are altruistic in their efforts. They have witnessed their peers prioritizing their personal success over the success of their group. Heather, who plays on a varsity athletic team, characterized her teammates as “selfish . . . it’s about me.” Her team policy is to abstain from alcohol while in season in order to be in peak athletic condition. She complies with the team expectation, but knows that many of her teammates do not because they would rather personally indulge.

Furthermore, it appears that degree that participants feel pressured can trump the team-oriented description of Howe and Strauss (2000). This contradiction requires further examination. Rashi describes her dilemma related to team projects. “It’s a competitive world, and you want to put yourself out there in front of people and push others back. . . . You want to shine.” Thus, she feels that group members often strive to excel for personal attention or gain rather than prioritizing the greater good of the group. The interplay of Howe and Strauss’ team-oriented and pressured characterization raises questions about the oversimplification of their generational definition.
Even though participants have been required to participate in teams, they do not believe that they are team-oriented. They prefer to work independently and are aware that team membership does not guarantee that members will prioritize the team’s needs. Instead, their peers are driven by individual success in an effort to be competitive in a world in which they feel pressured to succeed.

**Achieving**

Howe and Strauss (2000) depict the Millennial generation as achieving because during their youth educational systems in the United States have undergone scrutiny and have been required to respond. A national set of educational standards through the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) was enacted, which developed accountability for school systems. As a result, the members of this generation have been pushed to become the best educated in the nation.

Most participants concur with Howe and Strauss (2000) that their generation is motivated to achieve, which they have illustrated through their expectations for their future. However, except for academic achievement, the participants hone in on their individual characteristics that leads them to achievement rather than social influences, which are neglected. The participants believe that they are goal-oriented, which allows them to define and work toward personal success, and in turn they expect to achieve. However, a few of the participants are cautious that their generation has not experienced enough of life to know if they will achieve.

Like Howe and Strauss (2000), the participants identify education as an area in which they have had greater opportunities for access and, therefore are better educated than prior generations. They believe that a college degree has become the new baseline for minimal
education attainment. Therefore because more people are competing for limited spaces on campuses, they have experienced a college admission process that is highly competitive. As a result, the participants believe that they are expected to achieve academically and have a résumé of accomplishments that exceed their peers. Indu explains that in order to be accepted into a good college and compete for awards and scholarships, she thought she had to have A’s and fill her college applications with “rubbish.” Consequently, the reality of a competitive academic environment has motivated her and her peers to be “driven to . . . achieve.” Because the participants believe that a college degree is imperative for their future success and subsequently are currently enrolled college students, their perspective about academic achievement is likely to be influenced by this prioritization. Thus, the participants’ ambition to be successful and their link to education might serve as the motivation for this group to achieve academically, but may not be the same for non-college members of the generation.

Many of the participants equate goal-orientation with the generation’s potential to achieve. They believe that by setting goals, they provide the structure to achieve the particular goal. Ella described her generation as “a lot of people who really strive to achieve whatever goals they set before them.” She further stated that her generation “doesn’t necessarily easily give up on those goals.” Their focus on setting goals allows them to look toward the future. Penny, a senior, explains that her generation achieves because they are “trying to figure out what the next best thing to do” should be. As she nears graduation, she has already begun to think about her next goal so that she will have something toward which to work.
The participants believe that by setting goals they will ultimately be able have successful futures, which will allow them to feel they have achieved. Rashi stated, “You want to achieve a certain goal in life. You want to achieve a certain position. You want to become something in life.” For some, their motivation to achieve can be inspired by their naysayers. Kristy, for example, believes that people her age are dedicated to reaching their goals even when faced with adversity. She explained:

It, kind of, does something to our pride if we feel we can’t. You know, someone’s trying to tell us we can’t do something. We, kind of, it makes us want to go, try harder. Just so we can say that we did it, and then we can show them that, ‘hey, we did it’. So, yeah, we’re definitely achievers.

Their focus related to achievement appears to be assessed by their ability to set and attain their individual goals rather than their contributions to society, even though they have previously discussed their potential to effect change in society. However, Howe and Strauss (2000) primarily describe the characteristic of achieving to be the generations’ projected ability to contribute to society.

Some of the participants were unable to ascertain whether or not the generation is achievement focused. They believe that they are too young to determine their potential future attainments and have not experienced enough of life. Lewis, for example, stated, “I don’t think we’re really [achievement oriented]; I think it’s too early to tell if we’re achieving yet.” However, many participants perceive that society is pressuring them to achieve and be successful.
Conclusions

Howe and Strauss' (2000) seven-persona characterization of the Millennial generation appears to connect at the surface level with the participants in most areas. Yet, as the participants define their understanding of each characteristic, differences emerge related to the catalyst or their experience. Howe and Strauss' portrayal glosses over the intricacies and complexity that are apparent between members of the generation. Even though some aspects of the depiction resonate with the participants, they identify distinctions within the generation that cannot be ignored.
CHAPTER 6

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

*Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers.* – Socrates (469 BC-399 BC)

Socrates highlights the perpetual conflict that exists between generations. Theorists have attempted to untangle these perceived rifts for centuries, yet our understanding is still limited. In an attempt to comprehend changes that occur over time, society has compartmentalized groups based on kinship, age range, or similar life experiences. However, these categorizations limit our understanding of the multifaceted nature of a generation and create divides between generations. Based on the participants’ perceptions about generations in general, and the Millennial generation in particular, several noteworthy perspectives require further discussion.

In this chapter, I discuss the aspects that advance our understanding of the kaleidoscope that contributes to generational definitions. Specifically, I showcase a revised conceptual framework that shifts the focus from societal attributes and highlights the personal attributes. Out of the conceptual framework, I suggest that our understanding of generations is enhanced through an examination of within generational heterogeneity and between generational homogeneity. Furthermore, the differences perceived between generations, or generation gaps, are not as prominent as has been previously suggested. I also challenge the conventional generational length, approximately 20 years. Howe and Strauss’ (2000) limited definition of the Millennial generation is challenged, and new prominent aspects about the generation are discussed. I suggest recommendations for practices that higher education professionals can adopt to enhance their work with Millennial students. Lastly, several areas of potential future research are recommended.
Conceptual Framework

At the onset of the study, I postulated that the four-generation effects—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—defined in the literature served as the conceptual framework that provided a window to examine the complexity of a generation. However, these elements do not appear to provide the foundation initially thought. Even though a few connections exist, the structure that was presupposed is insufficient to explain a generation. Generational theory has predominately focused on societal attributes to understand and define generations. Neglected in this conceptualization are the personal attributes, which were featured prominently in this study. Therefore, I wanted simultaneously to explore the personal attributes along with the societal attributes that appeared to be missing from generational descriptions. I anticipated by probing the personal and societal attributes that the relationships and interrelationships of the generation effects would be revealed. What became obvious was that the personal attributes contributed more prominently. I contextualized the participants’ perspective about the societal and personal attributes based both in heterogeneity and homogeneity. This bifurcation is relevant as most of the generational characterizations examine only one aspect and neglect the other.

The prominence of the personal attributes, specifically family influence, was unexpected, yet appears to be an important component to understanding generations. I was surprised that the societal attributes, such as September 11th or the wars abroad, were not prominent in defining the generation unless the participant had a personal connection to the event. Furthermore, the participants described their understanding of societal events through the lens of their personal values and attitudes. This perspective shift suggests that societal events do not define a generation; rather the members of a generation view societal events
through a salience based on their individual values, attitudes and experiences. This distinction is noteworthy.

Thus, I propose that generational definitions should be broadened beyond a societal understanding and incorporate a more explicit emphasis on the personal attributes. Personal values and attitudes are taught by family members and develop throughout childhood. These values and attitudes become well defined. Therefore, the personal attributes appear to operate as spheres of influence. Generational members’ are guided by their personal attitudes and values, which are then influence their perception of the societal events occurring around them. Therefore, my conceptual framework for understanding a generation has evolved (See Figure 5.1).

As I grapple with a more accurate description of a generation, the image of a kaleidoscope continues to permeate. The concept of a kaleidoscope is difficult to adequately illustrate on paper, therefore I will describe the elements. A kaleidoscope is a tube that contains a circle of mirrors and colored glass. Looking through a kaleidoscope, a reflection is developed, and with each turn of the scope, a new reflection reveals itself. There is a similar parallel with generations and members within a generation. The colored glass pieces are the personal attributes and the values and attitudes that people develop throughout their youth. As a person looks through their personal kaleidoscope, their perspective about the world is revealed. These images are formed based on their prior experiences. The images may change as the scope is turned or as societal events occur; however, the foundation or colored glass remains constant. Thus, the context remains constant even though new reflections develop. Each member of the generation has an individual kaleidoscope. Some
members’ scopes will have similar colored glass and others will be vastly different creating a mosaic within the generation (See Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2

*Generation Kaleidoscope*
Generations

Theoretical interpretations about generations can be better understood through three distinct viewpoints that were revealed through this study. First, the limited way that prior theorists have examined generations through the lens of heterogeneity and homogeneity was exposed. Next, the concept of generation gaps to explain differences between generations was highlighted. Last, the conception of 20-year generational longevity was challenged.

Generations Reconsidered: Homogeneity and Heterogeneity

Prior generational research, regardless of the focus, has predominately examined either heterogeneity between generations or homogeneity within a generation. Yet, the converse perspective has not been examined or discussed. Within generational heterogeneity and between generational homogeneity are important aspects to consider. This study illuminates the heterogeneity of perspectives that are apparent in a small portion of the Millennial generation. The participants also propose that their perspectives are homogeneous with prior generations.

A one-sided approach has two major drawbacks and inadequate description of generations is developed. First, by examining only the similarities within a generation, diversity is undervalued and stereotypes perpetuated. Generation X, for example, has been described as lazy and insecure. Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong are both members of Generation X and have been recognized for their hard work and determination, which is counter to the characterization about their generation. Furthermore, by exploring only the differences between generations, boundaries and divides between age groups are established, and commonalities are ignored. The perspectives shared by the participants challenge the assumption of a limited approach.
**Homogeneity.** I anticipated that consistencies would exist with the participants based on the demographic characteristics of the group. Instead the participants’ experiences and perceptions coalesced in rare instances. Academic class standing, for example, provided a context for participants as they described their expectations about the economy. Seniors were particularly concerned about their immediate prospects in the job market, while freshmen were optimistic that improvements would occur before they graduate. Male participants expressed concern about gender equality in physical circumstances and the value of a college education.

More frequently than any other subgroup, African American participants’ attitudes clustered. The value African American’s place on family was conveyed with more importance than other participants. They described their relationship as cherished above any other. They also discussed consequences they have experienced due to limited male role modeling. African Americans also value education and believe that social mobility is connected with earning a college degree. African American women described religion as a foundation within their value system more frequently than other participants. Additionally, African Americans depicted the election of President Barak Obama more than an historic event, unlike their counterparts. They are inspired and believe that new opportunities wait in their futures. Even though the participants’ perspectives were homogeneous based on some demographic characteristics, more often, these linkages were not apparent. Thus, ascribed status is an insufficient benchmark to classify perspectives within a generation.

**Heterogeneity.** Likewise, the heterogeneity of perspectives described by the participants would be unexpected if only the prominent generational literature served as a guide for understanding. Instead, the participants’ viewpoints are more varied. Their
generational understanding and perceptions are influenced primarily by the attitudes and values they received from and continue to share with their parents. As a result, the personal attributes become a resounding benchmark for understanding generational attitudes. The importance of the familial relationships suggest that vast differences between generations may not exist; instead generational characteristics are based upon prominent or extreme examples in the generation and perhaps based upon assumption rather than reality. Generational theorists have previously suggested a relationship between generational development and family influence (Dunham, 1998; Roberts & Lang, 2001), but the relationship has not been adequately studied. It requires more attention.

Generation Gaps

In popular culture, the term generation is used to describe new car models, cooks, innovators, Veterans, etc. Society is obsessed with using the term “a new generation” to describe changes that occur in society without much consideration of the meaning of the term “a generation”. Consequently, the concept of a generation has become muddled. The study participants acknowledge that changes occur over time, yet they believe more similarities exist than are expressed. They believe that members of older generations would react in a similar way as the current generation if their world experience occurred in the same context. Thus, the participants do not view themselves as different from prior generations. This is a noteworthy consideration. In a progressive society, the world continues to evolve. Therefore, as youth enter into a stage of awareness of the broader world, they will react based on the resources available.

However, the personal attributes influence an individual’s perspective more so than the societal attributes. As such the personal attitudes, values, and priorities are the
orientation from which individuals view and react to societal changes. Yet, the predominant generational definitions conclude that societal changes stimulate the attitudes of generations. Instead, I contend that differences between generations are subtle. These differences become apparent as cultural or societal changes occur, but are not the cause of attitude changes. Individuals continue to rely on their personal value systems to evaluate societal changes; however different contexts may require a varied response.

Bourdieu (1993) argued that as “clashes between systems of aspiration formed in different periods” (p.99) misunderstandings occur that appear to be related to generations. Bourdieu’s premise is that each generation attempts to improve the world around them. Therefore, as newer generation members enter the world, they are unaware of progress that has been made due to the efforts of prior generations. The new generation lacks an appreciation for the struggles of the prior generation and conflict emerges. Even though the participants did not observe these differences as embattled, they recognize that transformations occur. I contend that as generational members recognize that an aspect of the world has changed, “generation gaps” develop. These gaps may seem distinctly different, but I suggest that the differences are smaller than they initially appear and occur over time. Individuals do not recognize the slight changes that occur until the differences are considerable.

Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) examined psychological constructs using a national dataset that tracks behaviors, attitudes, and values of American youth. The sample was geographically and demographically representative. Trzesniewski and Donnellan compared two cohorts of high school seniors—1976-1980 and 2001-2006. Out of the 31 variables considered, the researchers discovered only small differences in effect size on nine
constructs, of which, some were counterintuitive to the generational description about
Millennials. Trzesniewski and Donnellan caution that by analyzing aggregated data only, the
within-generational variability is lost. They conclude: “Psychological theory suggests that
great care should be exercised when forming generalizations about entire groups of people
based on limited perceptions that might be unduly influenced by extremely memorable
exemplars” (p. 70). The lack of evidence that vast differences occur between generations
should alter our discussion of generational divides. Trzesiewski and Donnellan’s study
underscores that generational gaps may not be as wide of a divide as some suggest and
supports my contention that homogeneity exists between generations.

Recent studies support the contention that generational differences might be more
fiction than fact (Hyde, 2005; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2009; Trzesniewski & Donnellan,
2010). Kowske, et al. (2010) analyzed work attitudes by individual, generation, and period
effects. They defined their generational categories based on Howe & Strauss’ (1991)
conceptualization. Even though Kowske, et al. discovered small variance levels based on
generational differences, they suggest that these differences are not practically significant.
Instead, they recommend that, “Individual level variables are much stronger [sic] predictors
of work attitudes than are period or generation” because the variability was greater on an
individual level than on the other levels (p. 273). Additionally, Kowske, et al. analyzed the
generations based on whether the individuals were early, middle, or late in the generation.
They discovered differences in work satisfaction levels based on the members’ status within
the generation, which implies that generational heterogeneity exists. Their findings are
consistent with the participants’ perspectives in this study. A collective or generational
viewpoint is not apparent and a 20-year generation time frame is too broad for accurate value and attitude development to occur.

Hyde (2005) makes a similar argument about gender similarities. The six broad variables Hyde examined include cognitive, verbal and nonverbal communication, social personality traits, psychological well-being, motor behaviors, and miscellaneous constructs, such as moral reasoning. Hyde contends that men and women are more similar than overinflated claims of difference that are perpetuated in popular culture. Hyde’s meta-analysis of psychological variables related to gender differences yielded results that contradict the broad-based assertions in most, but not all, areas that the two sexes are vastly different. Differences were apparent between the sexes in motor performance, such as throwing distance, sexuality in casual relationships, and physical aggression. The same argument is supported for generational differences—wide sweeping proclamations of generational divides are perpetuated, and in reality, more similarities seem to exist than are recognized and appear to be more of a reaction to societal changes rather than deviations between generations.

Generational Longevity

The participants conceptualized their generation through a narrower timeframe than a 20- to 25-year length that most generational theorists contend. However, their perception of generational length mirrors Levine and Cureton’s (1998) theory that college generations span seven years. The idea of a shorter generational length requires more attention. Several theorists describe stages or a beginning, middle and endpoint within a generation (Howe & Strauss, 1991; Kowske, et al., 2010). Participants defined their generation length based on educational benchmarks—beginning or end of college, high school or middle school. I
propose that this demarcation has relevance for generational understanding. For members of a generation at this stage of their lives, the primary life references points has been their educational milestones. Significant life events—education, marriage, parenthood, etc.—may better define an individual’s understanding of their current location in a generation. For example, the priorities for Penny, the mother or a two-year-old, has shifted from herself to her daughter. Even though some evidence supports a shorter generational span, further research is needed. Further research should also be conducted to understand major life events and whether they influence a person’s values and attitudes related to their generation.

By the chronological standards of previous generational theorists, a 22 year old and a 42 year old are considered a part of the same generation, yet the issues and priorities that are relevant to their daily living are probably vastly different. A 22 year old is likely to be at the onset of their career, family life, and pursuing their life dreams; while a 42 year old is likely to be at the middle stage of their career, established a family, and engaged in their life passions. The experiences of a 22 year old seem to be more aligned with a 29 year old than with a 42 year old. More research is needed in this area before any conclusions can or should be drawn. However, the clustering of life priorities appears to be an intriguing new venue to conceive of a generation.

**Howe and Strauss: Reexamined**

Howe and Strauss’ (1991, 2000) generational theory has been widely cited, particularly their description of the Millennial generation. College faculty and administrators welcomed their Millennial definition as a means to understand differences in students and parents. Howe and Strauss’ (2000) Millennial characterization has been the focus of many professional higher education conference presentations. However, their methods and
conceptual framework has rarely been challenged (Alter, 1991; Bonfiglio, 2008; Eddleman, 2010; Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007; Hesel & May, 2007; Newton, 2000; Sanchez, 2003). This study highlights some of the weaknesses in their uncontested description.

The majority of Howe and Strauss’ (1991, 2000) conclusions have been drawn from an examination of societal changes and their perception of the responses of varying age groups. Their claims often contradict the data they cite about generations. Furthermore, Howe and Strauss’ Class of 2000 study was not representative of the larger population yet; it is widely cited as characteristic of the entire population.

Even though some of the participants concurred with Howe and Strauss’ (2000) seven persona characteristics, their understanding of the terminology differed and often the participants’ did not connect the characteristic to themselves. Special and conventional are two prominent examples. Howe and Strauss explain that the media, parents and society have concentrated a significant amount of time and energy toward protecting and nurturing this generation sending a message that they are special and important to the nation. Howe and Strauss contend that the Millennials have great promise for the future. The participants concurred that they have received these messages; however, they do not believe that they are more special than any other generation.

Howe and Strauss (2000) described this generation as conventional because of the close relationships they have to their parents and that they are more likely to follow rules than break them. The participants, on the other hand, do not envision themselves in this way. They proclaim that they are more likely to challenge the current status quo to right the wrongs of previous generations. Yet, as the participants’ defined the lives and futures that they want for themselves, they describe a picturesque life that closely mirrors their current
family. Howe and Strauss’ characterization in these two areas is an external analysis that the participants cannot perceive about themselves.

Another significant difference between Howe and Strauss’ (2000) characterization and the participants’ viewpoint about their generation is whether as a generation they are generally positive or negative. Howe and Strauss argue that about the generation is positive, optimistic, and hopeful due, in part, to their close relationships with their parents. The participants do not share the same perspective. Instead, the participants advise that they have been exposed to violence, hatred, and conflict before an appropriate age due to their exposure to and use of technology. Furthermore, many believe that their desire for constant recognition hinders them. The participants have experienced a sudden and prolonged period of economic uncertainty, which for seniors has left them confused and unsure of what their futures will bring. Many described a desire to correct the wrongs or neglect of prior generations. They feel obligated address these issues, which are primarily focused on environmental concerns and the current direction of the country. Even though they are optimistic that they can change the current course, they are not positive about the climate of the country.

Howe and Strauss’ (2000) seven-persona portrayal of the current youth generation, the Millennials, appears to be limited at best and perhaps inaccurate at worst and necessitates further description. This study illuminates a greater diversity of perspective than Howe and Strauss conveyed. Generational descriptions are still limited and require further consideration.
The Millennials

The participants’ perspectives provide insight into the Millennial generation and highlight the broader perspective that should be understood as we attempt to describe “a generation.” The most prominent aspect of value and attitude formation is the family rather than being a member of a generation that shares common characteristics. Additionally, relationship closeness determines an alignment of values rather than the mere membership in the same age group. Even though value development is prominent throughout the participants’ perspective, one cultural reference, technology cannot be overlooked as a meaningful reference point for this generation. They crave safety and security in their daily living, economic reality, and their environment.

Family, particularly parents, serves as the salient priority upon which the participants base their values, attitudes and priorities, and thus is a personal attribute. Even though participants acknowledged differences with their parents, the fundamental underpinnings of their perspective about their generation and their life are grounded in values and attitudes that closely mirror their families. Some are aware of this relationship, while others do not recognize that they envision a life that closely parallels their parents. Pat, for example, stated, “Wow, I had not really thought about how much my family’s basic values had impacted my view on the world.” This connection underscores the connections that exist between generations and emphasizes that the perspectives of members within a generation may not be very divergent from what is already known. The participants’ perspective about gender roles illustrates this phenomenon. Overwhelming, the participants indicated that members of their generation are not bound by a particular gender role; however, as they
described the anticipated role of each sex, the participants described roles that parallel traditional conceptions.

The participants explained that the people with whom they have the closest relationships also share similar values and attitudes. This linkage is important to recognize as it discounts the commonalities that were expected based on cohort groupings. Class standing, campus affiliation, and demographic characteristics connected participants in rare circumstances. Social propinquity is a better determinant of value alignment than being the same age and may provide insight into within generational heterogeneity.

Technology is the single most important and distinctive societal attribute that the participants believe to define the Millennial generation. The participants identified the evolution of technology as a demarcation point between their generation and others. In many ways, the technology represents a lifestyle rather than a tool. They are unable to imagine life without the conveniences they believe technology provides.

Communication and information gathering are the most prominent uses of the technology. Text messaging, Facebook, and the Internet are prominent ways they to communicate with each other, which is often is instantaneous. The incessant use of technology has drawbacks. Interpersonal skills appear to be impeded, and many are impatient because they expect immediate responses.

Technology is at fingertips of the Millennial generation and they utilize it as a way to garner information. The participants do not believe they have to memorize or recall facts. This shift in knowledge acquisition is germane for educational institutions. Instruction that uses rote memorization may not be a skill that members of this generation believe is
necessary. Furthermore, students may demand teaching methods that incorporate the technology they use effortlessly.

Another downside related to the technology is their increased access and exposure to information. Hatred, violence, and media images that heretofore have been considered to be age inappropriate are easily accessible. Young people are exposed to the world is earlier in their lives and the sense of innocence that once may have been expected in young people has changed.

Safety and security is a topic that permeates many areas of the participants’ viewpoints. They are want financial security, feel that their education should guarantee them a job after graduation, and want to contribute to and improve the future of the country by correcting prior injustices, which will sustain the future world. Obtaining an advanced education and securing employment that provides the financial stability they desire is interdependent. They have been told and believe that a college education is necessary to acquire a job that will allow them to gain the financial security that they desire. The participants, specifically men, are concerned that their education may not provide the opportunities they believe have been promised; this fissure causes them concern. Furthermore, seniors are concerned about the current job market and some feel jaded by their current prospects.

Some social issues, particularly the environment, trouble the participants. They believe that prior generations have not addressed these concerns and that they are, therefore, obligated to change the course so that future generations will not have to worry. Their desire to leave the world better than how they perceive at present is noble and many have elected to incorporate lifestyle changes to accommodate.
Recommendations for Practice

Although theorists have attempted to describe and define generations, the concept is more complex and multifaceted as this study illustrates. Yet, society has latched on to the concept and uses the term frequently and in a multitude of contexts. It is prudent that caution is exercised as generational comparisons are made. Recently, the Millennial characterization has been referenced as a means of understanding students or families that differ from faculty and administrators’ own experience in the world and on campus or to understand changing student dynamics. This study highlights that these understandings are incomplete, and therefore I suggest several recommendations for practice on college campuses.

Avoid generational or student generalizations and recognize diversity.

Generational definitions merely feature prominent ideas about a generation and overlook the variability. Distinctions are made regarding the differences between generations, and we neglect the variability within a generation. Even if some students’ behaviors and actions parallel broad-based generational definitions, many will not.

Stereotyping and discrimination based on generational differences has not been widely reported; yet people are aware of perceived differences, particularly in the workplace (Bartley, et al., 2007; Criber, 1981; Gordon & Steele, 2005; Zemke, et al., 2000). Generational labeling has the potential to become a potential slippery slope that could result in a new form of discrimination. Conversations that highlight similarities or discuss perceptions about generational differences should be occurring on college campuses, particularly because there are multiple generations that can join the dialogue.
Consider family and family background as central to the individual.

The exploration of the personal attributes emphasizes the connection that college-aged students still have with their families. These distinctive relationships inform the values and attitudes of students and should not be underestimated. Understanding these relationships may provide insight into student priorities.

Parent programs on college campuses have gained popularity in the last two decades, and were primarily developed to respond to increased parental involvement in their child’s collegiate experience. I am not suggesting that we revert back to the days of *in loco parentis* on campuses, however college administrators should consider the strength of these relationships and begin to understand if there are other connections that could augment the collegiate experience.

Develop an awareness of the technology infrastructure salient to students.

Students believe that the technology of the 21st century has been made for them and it is part of a lifestyle. Clearly, technology has changed the way that students interact with the world and will continue to be a prominent communication medium for them. College faculty and administration who are resistant and do not stay abreast of technological developments may have difficulty connecting with students and understanding the type of engagement they demand. Faculty will have to evaluate if teaching and learning methods or approaches should be modified and find ways to incorporate technology seamlessly. Administrators will also be required to continue to examine how services are delivered and determine appropriate changes. With decreased and limited funding, a realistic challenge will be balancing the costs associated with technological advancements including upgraded equipment, time
considerations to implement new systems and programmatic changes, and support to teach faculty and staff the new technologies.

The participants in this study also advocated that interpersonal and communication skills sets, specifically face-to-face communication and problem solving, have declined because of their use of technology. These skills are important in work and life interactions, and may need new strategies for development during the college years. Faculty and administrators should be cognizant of opportunities to teach or reinforce skills in these areas.

The Millennials and the generations that arrive on college campuses henceforth will continue to have differences, although similarities will exist also. For those of us who work on college campuses, we must shift our mindset from “these students are so different” to acknowledging the natural societal evolutions occur and that the youth on campus are a reflection of these changes. Our “gaps” with the current college generation are ours to own and manage. We must be reflective of ways to bridge the gaps.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Researchers have been attempting to understand generations for centuries. However, our current theoretical viewpoints are limited and do not provide a full understanding of the complexity. Media frequently uses the expression “the next generation” to describe just about any change between groups or to suggest that a transformation will be occurring in the future. By relying on this terminology to merely describe changes results in a muddled and inconsistent conception of generations. The generational kaleidoscope is complex and requires further study. I offer several potential research areas.

This study unveils the importance of the personal attributes. The parental values and attitudes are a primary influence that affects their children. Studies that include members of
different family generations may provide greater insight as to whether family values and attitudes persist throughout life. This influence of family on generational development has not been studied adequately and deserves further attention.

Many generational studies typically examine young adults or differences in the workplace. Studies that consider the perspectives of more than high school or college students should be considered. Studying a cross-section of all living generations would assist with answering some of these questions. Furthermore, further generational research should be attentive to including samples that are representative of demographic and geographic diversity.

Two demographic characteristics, urban versus rural and large differences in socioeconomic status, in particular were not clearly differentiated in this study. Therefore, further study focusing on these dimensions may contribute to our understanding of generations.

Finally, heterogeneity between and homogeneity within generations has been the focal point of most studies. However, heterogeneity within and homogeneity between generations has been greatly ignored. This study unveiled that homogeneity and heterogeneity exits in both dimensions. Therefore, research should be conducted to examine the converse, which will help enlighten our understanding of generations.

Epilogue

Howe and Strauss (2000) attempted to capture the spirit of the Millennial generation in their seven persona description. However, this study illustrates that Howe and Strauss' description woefully underrepresents the Millennial generation. The lack of similarities across the participants' perspectives highlights the variations that occur from person to
person even though they are members of the same generation. By embracing generational
descriptions, we limit our understanding of generations and develop an inadequate portrayal
of members of a generation.

I conclude with one final thought to ponder. Jonathan Reed’s *Lost Generation* poem
was submitted as an entry for the 2007 AARP U@50 contest and is a poignant example of
the unpredictability of generations. Due to the nature of the poem, it is better viewed on the
next page.
Lost Generation

I am part of a lost generation
and I refuse to believe that
I can change the world
I realize that this may be a shock but
"Happiness comes from within."
is a lie, and
"Money will make me happy."
So in 30 years I will tell my children they are not the most important thing in my life
My employers will know that
I have my priorities straight because work is more important than family
I tell you this
Once upon a time
Families stayed together but this will not be true in my era
This is a quick fix society
Experts tell me
30 years from now, I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce
I do not concede that
I will live in a country of my own making
In the future
Environmental destruction will be the norm
No longer can it be said that My peers and I care about this earth
It will be evident that My generation is apathetic and lethargic.
It is foolish to presume that There is hope.
And this will all be true unless we choose to reverse it.

There is hope.
It is foolish to presume that My generation is apathetic and lethargic.
It will be evident that My peers and I care about this earth
No longer can it be said that Environmental destruction will be the norm
In the future I will live in a country of my own making.
I do not concede that
30 years from now, I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce
Experts tell me This is a quick fix society
But this will not be true in my era
Family stayed together
I tell you this
I have my priorities straight because family is more important than work.
My employer will know that they are not the most important thing in my life
So in 30 years I will tell my children "Money will make me happy" is a lie, and "Happiness comes from within."
I realize that this may be a shock but I can change the world.
And I refuse to believe that I am part of a lost generation

-Jonathan Reed (2007)
References


APPENDIX A
Consent Form

The Portrait of Millennial College Students Based on the Relationships and Interrelationship between Personal and Societal Attributes Relating to the Four Generation Effects

I, ____________________________, agree to participate in a phenomenological study involving individuals enrolled as undergraduate students. The purpose of this study is to understand how personal and societal attributes as related to the four generation effects—time interval, cohort, period, and attitude—create a portrait of the current cohort of college students within the Millennial generation. The researcher has further focused the study by selecting traditional aged college students (18-24) students who are matriculated in an undergraduate program on two different universities. This study is part of the requirement for degree completion toward a Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership, at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

As a participant, I understand that my involvement in this study is purposeful because 32 undergraduate students will be selected, 16 at each institution, with the intention of exploring a wide variety of experiences and perceptions about the experiences of the participants. I understand I will be asked questions regarding my perceptions about generational descriptions and my life experience, and that the honesty and accuracy of my responses are crucial for this study. I also understand that I am not required to answer every question that is asked.

I understand that I will be expected to participate in one interview lasting no longer than 90 minutes, relating to my experience. I also agree to fill out a demographic information sheet. I agree that I will have the opportunity to read and review transcripts that are generated during the interviews to check and correct them for accuracy.

I have been informed that any information obtained in this study through the individual interview or the demographic information sheet will be recorded with a pseudonym of my choosing that will allow only the researcher to determine my identity. At the conclusion of this study, the key linking me with the pseudonym will be destroyed. I also acknowledge that individual discussions will be audio taped to ensure the accuracy of the data analyzed. At the conclusion of the study, the recordings will be erased and will no longer be available for use. All efforts will be made to conceal my identity in the study’s report of results and to keep my personal information confidential. All artifacts submitted will be returned to me or destroyed if that is not possible.

Due to the nature of the focus for this study, I understand that there may be some minimal psychological discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in this study at any time by notifying the researchers by e-mail or telephone. My decision to participate or not participate will not affect my relationships with the college in general. If I have any questions that arise in connection with my participation in this study, I should contact Dr. Dorothy Finnegan, the
dissertation chair and associate professor in the School of Education at 757-221-2346 or definn@wm.edu. I understand that I may report any problems or dissatisfaction to Dr. Thomas Ward, chair of the School of Education Internal Review Committee at 757-221-2358 or tjward@wm.edu or Dr. Michael Deschenes, chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at the College of William and Mary at 757-221-2778 or mrdesc@wm.edu.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, that I consent to participating in the ways described above, and that I agree to allow the researchers to observe my interview group as a part of this study.

Date Participant

Date Investigator

APPENDIX B

Email to Potential Participants

Dear Research University or Liberal Arts University Freshman or Senior,

I am a doctoral candidate at the College of William and Mary working on a PhD in Educational Planning, Policy, and Leadership.

As an undergraduate [freshman/senior] at [Liberal Arts University/Research University], you are being invited to contribute to my dissertation research by participating in a 90-minute interview on your campus and providing one item that represents students of your generation. The purpose of the study is to explore characteristics associated with college students who comprise the Millennial generation (born between 1982 and 2000). My study examines personal and societal attitudes that shape college students within the Millennial generation.

Participation is voluntary and any information collected for the study will be keep absolutely confidential and no reference will be made in any oral or written report that would link you individually to the study. Participating or refusing to participate will not affect your status or grades at [LAU or RU].

If you are willing to assist with my study, please contact me by returning the attached Informed Consent Form with your name typed on the line indicating the participant. This will serve as a digital signature indicating your willingness to participate in the study.

Thanks in advance for your time and assisting me with my research.

Sincerely,
Holly Alexander Agati
Doctoral Candidate
holly@wm.edu
757.221.1729

This project was found to comply with appropriate ethical standards and was exempted from the need for formal review by the [Liberal Arts University and Research University] Protection of Human Subjects Committee (phone#s) on [insert date] and expires [insert date].
APPENDIX C
Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Tell me about yourself and what is important to you in life.

Personal Attributes

2. Tell me about your immediate family (including structure, educational attainment, race/ethnicity; economic prosperity; political affiliation)
3. What is important to you about (insert bulletin points below) and what has influenced these expectations:
   a. Family life
   b. Gender roles
   c. Education
   d. Religion
   e. Lifestyle
   f. The future
4. Are your attitudes similar to your peers? If so or if not, how are they similar or different?
5. Are your attitudes similar to societal expectations in these areas? If so, how; if not, how do they differ?

Generation

6. How do you describe your generation and who would you include?
7. Does the size of your age group make any difference – to you, in our society?
8. How do you describe others outside of your generation, that is, different generations?
9. How do you believe that other generations perceive your generation?

Social Attributes

10. What world events have defined your generation?
11. Has the state of the economy and the economic outlook contributed to your outlook for today and expectations for your future? If so, how?
12. Has the change in political leadership in the U.S contributed to your outlook? If so, how?
13. Have the wars in the contributed to your outlook? If so, how?
14. Have technology advances contributed to your outlook? If so, how?
15. Has any recent national or global issue contributed to your outlook? If so, what and how?
16. Are there other issues besides the ones that I have mentioned that influence your outlook?

Closing

17. Millennials have been described as special, conventional, pressured, sheltered, confident, team-orientated, and achieving. Do you perceive these characteristics to be representative of yourself or your peers?
APPENDIX D
Demographic Form

Gender: _____ Male _____ Female

Age: _______________

Race: __________________________

Do you receive need-based financial aid? _____ Yes _____ No
### APPENDIX E

**Participants by Demographic Data**

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LAU = Liberal Arts University  
RU = Research University
Vita

Holly Alexander Agati

Birthdate: August 19, 1969

Birthplace: Ellsworth, Maine

Education:

2003-2012 The College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, Virginia
Doctor of Philosophy
*Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership*
*(Higher Education)*

1991-1993 Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, Pennsylvania
Master of Arts
*Student Affairs in Higher Education*

1987-1991 Franklin Pierce College (University)
Rindge, New Hampshire
Bachelor of Arts
*Social Work and Counseling (major), Philosophy (minor)*