

THE GENERATION GAP

By Nevitt Sanford

Bridge it

I have read almost more than I want to about generations of various kinds and about youth, without really feeling enlightened on the subject. I can perhaps relieve my own situation somewhat by talking about adults as well as youth, on the theory that it takes two to make a generation gap. I would like to place the idea of a generation gap first in the perspective of psychology, then in a kind of sociological-historical perspective, to indicate the interaction between the two, and finally, suggest some possible trends and some things we might want to take action on.

As I understand it, the generation gap is a way of referring to conflict between people of different generations, like parents and their children (usually their late adolescent children), and to misunderstanding, on the part of these two groups, of each other. It's an old and familiar topic, particularly in Western societies. In the play *Man and Superman*, Jack, the young man, assumed that all advanced, progressive thinking or "free thought" would, of course, be found among the young. At one point he proposed introducing a bill in Parliament that would bar grey-beards from that body. This play was written in 1909. But that notion is current today.

Perhaps in village societies where boys take responsibility for work at nine and girls get married at the age of eleven, we don't find generational conflicts of a sort that we know. This may also be true in a very stable preliterate society in which age and sex are clearly defined and very clear rites mark the passage from one age grade to another. But conflict seems to be the rule in industrial societies, where we extend the periods of youth (for good reasons I think) and where adolescence is recognized as a definite stage of development.

In this stage of development impulses are strong in relation to an individual's capacity for control. You have the impression that things are about to break loose, that the controls are not as yet secure. You find what appear to be instances of undercontrol of actual outbreaks of thinly disguised childhood impulses, and you also find instances of overcontrol or counterforces against impulses which sometimes take the form of striving for perfection or demands for purity in others. This is one source of the well-known idealism of youth. Similarly, youth find their

membership in their peer culture a source of great loyalty and a source of further control over their impulses. In late adolescents, among college-age youth, you find a struggle for self-esteem: the great tests of life still lie ahead, youth are by no means sure they are going to make it. It's very difficult for them to evaluate what they can do, if not what they are; and so we witness instances of painful underestimation of themselves varying with instances of extreme overevaluation. Also, there are problems with authority, and these are often acute for college freshmen. They cannot live with it and they cannot do without it. On one side, they are under strong obligation to establish their independence from their parents and other adults. On the other side, these adults have a great deal to offer and the tendencies to dependence still are very strong.

Adults have a very hard time understanding young people, or shall I say maintaining their equilibrium with respect to them. There are very good psychological reasons for this. Probably the most important is that young people remind adults of the problems of their own adolescence and this re-arouses many conflicts they knew at a much earlier time. For my part, I've always been afraid of adolescents and have freely confessed it. I recall confessing this once to the head of a high school, and he said he found them very charming people. I was amazed and took heart to find that people thirty years old and older maintain their equanimity and even communicate with adolescents.

Sometimes we just stand off. Mervin Freedman and Paul Kanzer in their study of teenage drinking talked to a young girl, a 15-year-old who said when she was ten, her family regarded her as one of them, but when she got to be an adolescent they somehow couldn't talk to her, or wouldn't, and they treated her as if she belonged to a different species. She found it very awkward and resorted to all kinds of efforts to get them to pay attention. As a matter of fact, these investigators found among teenagers who were drinking, a strong tendency for their parents to ignore their drinking or to believe they were not drinking.

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So the young people set themselves to the task of drinking enough to make their parents worry about it.

Sometimes teenagers are viewed in a hostile way. Adults sometimes project onto the young people impulses of their own that are not well enough controlled, then believe the worst about them. One gets the impression that there are substantial sections of the population who are willing to believe almost anything about our youth. Youth serve the role of scapegoat for a great many adults, who ascribe to young people and to students the same kinds of things that used to be ascribed to communists. Often youth upset adults not only by seeming ready to express impulses that are barely controlled in the adults, but also by showing a kind of moral purity that is rather embarrassing.

Wolin and Schaar in talking about the students who took part in the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, commented on this purity of motives and the difficulty this created for the faculty. Imagine our embarrassment if people really behaved as true Christians, for example. We would find it for the most part a trifle awkward.

Adults have a tendency to relive their own adolescence in their children, to become identified with them, and sometimes even egg them on. I have often taken part vicariously in a demonstration, being otherwise too tired or too preoccupied to actually do the walking myself. It's nice to have the energy to express what one would somehow like to express. Or, what is more difficult of course, adults sometimes try to live the lives of their children for them. Mothers become terribly upset if their daughters are not having enough dates or if they're having too many dates. Or fathers become upset if their sons do not appear sufficiently masculine or if they do nothing but pursue their masculinity to the neglect of their studies. Under these circumstances, young people feel that it's impossible to please their parents or other adults.

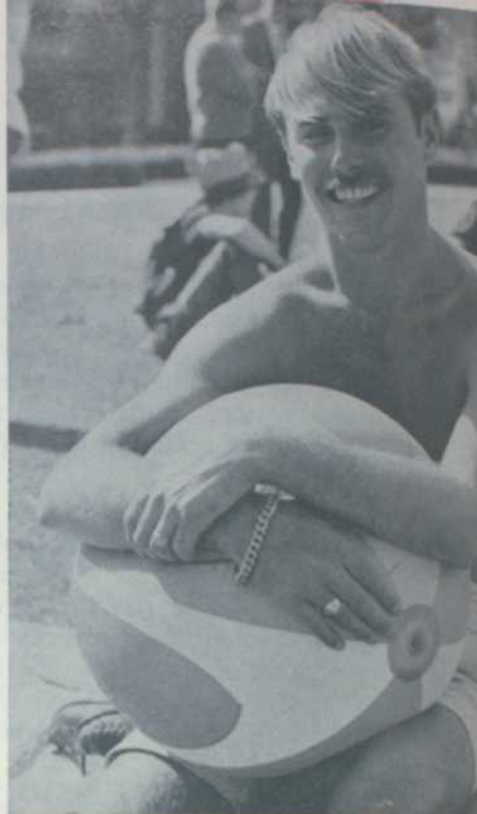
Sometimes adults actually join in, become good fellows, and try to be one of the youthful group. An interesting current manifestation of this is to be found in the sociological and anthropological studies of deviant youth groups by the method of participant observation. The social scientist will adopt the language and the mode of dress, and actually get the same kind of satisfaction from these activities. I made up a story about this to the effect that the typical inhabitants of a Haight-Ashbury pad would be five boys, three girls, and a Berkeley sociologist. Adults find it hard to perceive teenagers accurately. But I believe it's fair to say youth are not very good at perceiving adults either. In fact, I feel that they do less well than adults do in perceiving young people. The fundamental reason for this is that adolescents and college students bring to their relations with other people stereotyped images that were contrived in childhood and were to some extent fixed by being made unconscious. Boys and young men expect their male teachers to be like fathers. Often they perceive adults simply as impersonal restraining forces or as heroic models of perfection or purity, putting into them far more than belongs there and then being disillusioned when they find the adults have feet of clay.

In a recent novel, Herbert Gold makes the point that it was a long time before he felt that he could write about his father. His new book, *Fathers*, is mostly about his own father. It is about generational conflicts and how long it takes for a son to get to a place where he can really see his father and feel something of what he knows his father must have felt.

Students just don't look at adults. For example, many freshmen cannot describe their teachers. In an open-ended questionnaire, we asked Stanford students to describe their teachers, those that they liked and those that they didn't like. They couldn't do it. They only mentioned the efficiency with which the material was presented or something of that sort. Girls did a little better in describing male teachers than did boys. They could at least notice what sort of ties they were wearing and perhaps concoct little fantasies about their home lives. But for the most part they just didn't observe the teacher as a person.

So these mutual misperceptions, or the absence of correct perceptions, lead to extraordinary and complex relationships between people of different generations. Some years ago, we had the chance to study some women who had graduated from Vassar College twenty to twenty-five years before. We gave them quite an assessment, including in our bag of tricks the thematic apperception test where they tell stories about pictures. I was struck by the case of one woman who was very much of a feminist in her outlook. She reported that she could hardly wait for her children to get into school so that she could get out of the house and onto the job. She was described as having a large masculine component in her personality makeup, but in her stories the mother figures were the centers of very traditional extended families. They were reproducing the species and, at the center of an extended group of people, seeing to it that everybody was looked after and that life was carried on: all homemakers. Her daughter was bent on being a homemaker, like so many Vassar girls of the '50s, when girls were exhibiting a flight into femininity. (The average number of children desired by Vassar girls of 1954 was four.) So this woman's daughter then was the opposite of what her mother in fact was, but was planning a life corresponding to the mother's fantasies. This is one kind of generational conflict that is fairly common.

Of course failure of communication is more than just a generational thing. Young men and women have a hard time learning to perceive each other as people and to relate to each other as people. This is a common phenomenon on college campuses where most of the styles of relating to people prevent their getting to know each other as individuals, so that young people bring to their relationships with each other the stereotypes from childhood, or they see each other as objects or representatives of this or that. I have often heard young men in college express amazement and excitement when they discovered that a young woman was really human or had feelings or that one could talk to her. Students complain a great deal about the absence on our college campuses of the setting or opportunities in which people can get to know each other. Most of the sex relations are ordered in such a way as to make for all sorts of interactions other than genuinely personal ones.



From a sociologist's point of view, youth as I understand it would be defined as a state of affairs in which one is not yet committed to social roles, such as marriage or the job. A youth is free to try different kinds of roles and is under no obligation to be consistent. He is therefore in a very good position to advocate what is new. He takes very little risk in doing so. If his parents are participating fully in one kind of dream, then he is free to conceive for himself another.

This raises the question of when does youth actually end and how does it end. It's remarkable that this has been studied almost not at all. Nobody studies people between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-six. We study children and we study old people and we study adolescents and we have recently begun studying college students. But people just out of college are very rarely studied. In the follow-up interviews with the young women we knew so well at Vassar we were enormously impressed with how much they had changed in the five years after college. What must happen during this phase is that a youth actually turns into an adult, in the sociological sense of the word, and yet it's not quite clear as to how this actually happens. Presumably, it begins to happen when they begin taking adult roles. A girl, when she becomes a mother, will usually conceive her own mother in a quite different way than she did before, or a young man who becomes a teacher will suddenly have it dawn on him what his own teacher was driving at and what that relationship was actually about.

We have generational conflicts in our society to a large extent because we change so much. When a society is changing, there are bound to be differences in values, beliefs, and interests between people of different generations. Adults have commitments to their roles and to the beliefs that they acquired in their formative years and they are not in a position to adapt immediately to what is new, while the youth are. This is not too disturbing. I think difficulties arise when the hostilities and psychological conflicts that I spoke of are brought into this picture. In America we've had declines of religion, at various times and places, with the old people being very religious and the youth being new-thought people. We've had the conflict between the city and the country with the old people carrying on in the traditional agrarian way and the young people taking on "citized" ideas. We've had the changes in morals following World War I when it was no longer possible "to keep them down on the farm." It was the young people who represented the new morality and the adults who stuck to their older ways. Probably one of the most characteristic generational conflicts in America has had to do with the immigrants and their children—the old people bringing the old ways from the old country and the young people being in a great hurry to adapt themselves to the new ways with which they've become acquainted in school. In the '30s the great majority of prison inmates that I knew were the sons of immigrants. This was in Massachusetts and a great many of them were French-Canadian. The sons' natural differences with their fathers were exacerbated by the fact that their fathers were insisting on the traditional values and the sons were trying to Americanize themselves in a great hurry.

Going farther back, the generational conflicts of the '20s were about as dramatic as anything that we see today. It seems to me that the flaming youth of the '20s must have shocked parents of that time. In raising the question of whether the generation gap is widening—do we mean to say that it's wider now than it was in the '20s when the daughters of stable families were learning to smoke cigarettes and to drink whiskey and to wear their skirts above their knees? This was pretty extreme, and extremely difficult for people who had teenagers and young people to deal with.

In Russia, of course, the great problem today is how to keep the youth going in a revolutionary direction. For some time they have been influenced by Western ways. One explanation for the rise of Nazism was the fast discrepancy between young men and their fathers generated during the depression years in Germany when the fathers became unemployed, lost their self-respect, but nonetheless tried to maintain the same discipline over their sons that they had in the past: in the entirely new situation, sons were no longer willing to respect their fathers.

There is a long-term difference between generations that could be accounted for on the basis that the child training undergone or endured by parents would be different from the child training of the next generation, as for example, between people brought up in the Watsonian era of child training and those brought up in the Spock era. It's Charles McCabe's hypothesis, expressed in a recent column, that the young people today, in larger numbers than before, are unwanted children. They were born during the '40s under all sorts of adverse conditions or they were conceived in marriages of convenience and turned out to be unwanted and now they behave as such. In his study of alienated young men, Keniston has put heavy stress on that type of family situation in which the mother is very strong and dominant and the father weak and disappointing—an American phenomenon of a certain stage in our history.

Many of our present-day college students were brought up in homes in which the parents were uncertain about values. They couldn't bring themselves to urge this or that value upon their children. There was too little to rebel against and youth were also apt to misinterpret a kindly reproach from their parents as a manifestation of totalitarianism.

It's very difficult to check this kind of hypothesis. It's less difficult to pay attention to differences in the formative college years. We know from a study of Vassar women of different graduating classes since 1904 that the attitudes and values which they have now at the age of seventy or sixty or fifty differ according to what kind of climate prevailed when they were in college. The women who were seventy when we saw them could be described as Nineteenth Century liberals, very different from the women of 1912, when things had changed, very different from the women of the '20s, of the '30s, of the '40s. It is the difference between the New Deal outlook of the '30s and the Theodore Roosevelt outlook.

In the well-known report on "Education at Berkeley," the Muscatine Committee points to the enormous discrepancies between what we preach and the situation that actually exists. We talk about democracy but the

youth are fully aware of the enormous amount of poverty in this country. We talk about our ideals, and yet we have the Vietnam War. We uphold honesty and yet we have dishonesty in advertising and even in the federal government. In a general way, the situation that we're in today tends to dehumanize human relationships, with a technology that we can't do without and don't propose to do without because it's the source of our well-being, and with the problem of poverty in the midst of plenty. It's obvious that the rich continue to get rich and the poor poor, not only in our nation, but in the world; and when young people see this they can't help but be upset by hearing adults preach as if this were not so.

All of this naturally lays the ground for a youth movement, and the one we have now is like those of the past. Movements in France and Germany, near the end of the last century, expressed opposition to the impersonal organization of life, to the tendency to sacrifice moral, emotional, intellectual, and esthetic values to material expansion, and a desire for greater closeness with other people. The present time is really not much worse than the Joseph McCarthy period. I would suggest that the activity of students on the political and social fronts has to do not only with the badness of the times but with some encouraging features of recent years, such as the civil rights movement and President Kennedy's putting his stamp of approval on it. One big theme of our time is the relative affluence in which young people of college age have been brought up.

We see in young people, certainly the more articulate ones, the intellectual and sensitive ones, a preference for a more humanistic and democratic society. We see it in the accent on people-related jobs—social science, social service, the ministry, and humanities. The natural sciences have barely been holding their own, engineering has been declining, while preference for business has dropped very sharply. The students at Stanford, from whom we have collected many questionnaires on the point, when asked about values or what they expect to be doing with themselves, will put self-development, good relations with other people, finding a suitable identity ahead of success in their profession. This, I am sure, is a change from ten years ago.

In the universities, the great change since '50s can be understood, I think, in the light of developments on the national scene. In the '50s, there was a shortage of young people of college age along with a great economic boom that created an enormous need for young people to man the productive machinery of the nation. Added to this was the appearance of the Sputnik in middle '50s, which persuaded universities to place great emphasis on the production of specialists as quickly as possible. That was a time for the accent on early discovery of talent, on all kinds of rich rewards for people who would go into science, and it was a time in which "conservative" educators came into their own, raising standards and so forth. In the '60s there is no longer any shortage of young people, there is no longer any great pressure to gain a place in the economic system. The students were ready for a more leisurely pace and for a more meaningful education, but the colleges had found too much that they liked in the situation of the '50s. They still wanted to continue to up-

grade themselves by raising standards which often consisted simply in assigning twice as much reading as the year before, or putting in new courses to rival those that were known to exist at Harvard.

This I think is very important in considering the student protests of recent years and the reaction of the powers-that-be in the universities. By 1960, things had become highly bureaucratized, leading to a high level of impersonality on the university campuses. There are some special lessons to be learned from the studies of the students who took part in the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. Studies by the Berkeley psychologist Paul Heist and by the sociologists Summers and Watts and Whittaker are in line with similar studies that have been made at Chicago and other places throughout the country. These studies all agree that students who take part in protests and demonstrations are brighter and get better grades than those who do not, that in a general way they conform more closely to the faculty's conception of what is a good student, and that they often come from affluent homes—from homes in which parents are highly educated. It is interesting to note that the FSM was not an expression of a generational conflict, it was not a rebellion against parents, because rather overwhelmingly, the young people had the approval of their parents. They were simply expressing in action what their parents in fact believed.

The rebellion was less against parents than against certain institutional ills of our society.

In our own study of this at Stanford, using personality tests, we found a much greater maturity among the activist students than among the rank and file. We were able to say that the activist students differed from the rank and file students at Berkeley in essentially the same way that college seniors differ from college freshmen. They are more advanced psychologically, one might say, as well as being ahead intellectually. This means, I think, that what we can expect is an increasing number of students of this type. We can certainly anticipate that affluence is going to continue, and that education is going to grow apace: educational institutions are going to be upgraded and students will be more advanced, more sophisticated. Better prepared students will be entering colleges in increasing numbers and they will demand that they be treated as adults. They will be deeply concerned with educational and social reform.

As to whether the generation gap is widening, I still find it hard to tell; but I would say that it is wide enough. Whether or not it is a good thing depends on what kinds of activities, which ideas or which cultural items we are talking about. I find myself in communication with the students as long as they are demonstrating for something I'm in favor of. But some are much interested in things that don't interest me, or things that I am opposed to, and then I worry about the generation gap. We have to differentiate. We don't want to lump together everything that young people are for or interested in as if it were just one thing. I think we need to look at the kinds of values that are being put forward, the kinds of interests that are there, and make our own judgments about them. I for one am in favor of the students' efforts to bring about educational reform. So far they haven't made any

criticisms of higher education quite as severe as mine, but I think it's all to the good that they are active on this front, and I've already seen good effects of their activity. I think we can expect more of it in the future. I don't believe the hippies are going to be effective in forwarding their values in our society. They offer a valuable, dramatic critique of the ills of our society, but the whole movement seems to assume that there will always be an establishment to which people can stand in opposition. I think the same criticism can be made of the New Left—that there is too much of an assumption of the durability of the establishment and not enough of an effort to say what should be the model for the good society that is advocated.

I think we should pay attention to what the youth stand for in politics, in religion, in morals, manners, what they read, their music, and ask ourselves which of these elements can become a part of our general culture. We will all differ in this respect. People who have long been interested in mysticism will find kinship with some of the religious ideas being put forward in the youth movement today. I have indicated that people of my political stripe naturally find community with many of the youth. It would be interesting to ask what are the activities in which groups of adults and groups of young people might participate together. I would be happy to join those attending professional football games, but someone else can attend those musical events that appeal particularly to the young.

In asking whether the generation gap is a good thing, we certainly must say that there is no place for those irrational sources of conflict that I mentioned earlier. I suggest that if we want to reduce generational conflict, we can begin by giving the youth more responsibility earlier. We can certainly do this in schools and colleges. I fail to see why the colleges put up so much resistance to efforts by the students to take a greater part in governing themselves or even in making some decisions about what they want to study.

I suggest also that the irrational sources of conflict can be modified through education, adult as well as ordinary education. In my class this winter, I requested from the students a case study on someone they knew well. One

girl did a case study of her mother, and in the middle of this work, she suddenly discovered that she had her mother all wrong, that her mother was not at all what she had thought when she started out to write this study. This led her to ask what her own biases were, and this in turn led her to make some important discoveries about herself. We could, if we worked at it, put together some educational procedures that would work directly at the misperceptions of the generations. At many colleges the students regard the faculty as a great mystery; they see them only as lecturers. Sometimes they become enormously curious and want to visit them in their homes, or to attend a campus abroad, where they see faculty in more intimate types of situations.

Faculty people are not too eager for this kind of relationship. They are busy with research, and they don't perceive students accurately either. They see them in the mass. They are afraid that a relationship with a student will turn out to be too much of an emotional drain. They are somewhat in the same position as physicians who have no time to establish relationships with patients.

Most important for reducing generational conflict are programs that will appeal to the spirit of youth. The Peace Corps, foreign and domestic, is certainly the right kind of a thing. All of us can recall the excitement with which this was greeted by young people. We need massive programs of this sort, addressed to the massive social problems which are all around us.

Adults need very much to reform themselves. Those who run our institutions must by all means deliberately work to humanize them, to become alert to those activities which are dehumanizing or dishonest. It's remarkable the amount of lying that takes place in the world today at all levels; it has become almost the preferred strategy of many people in responsible positions. This alienates youth every time. They insist on honesty, and it seems the least we can aim at is to offer that.

Perhaps above all, we need adult leadership of a kind that young people will indeed respond to, leadership which is daring. It's been a long time since an academic man, a member of the faculty, has been attacked by the philistines and the body politic. □

Father to Son

Riding his bearded Daddy's back
And fat as a sacrificial lamb,
He clings with the faith of Isaac
And clutches tightly this hairy man.

He is weaned from his Mother's breast;
Instead strange teeth invade his mouth
And swords of spittle wash upon his chest
To moisten his dry clothes' drouth.

He blubbers and grunts insensibly,
His tiny hands uncertain fists
That flail the air defenselessly.
His sharp eyes pierce the infant mists.

He sits in the sun like a waxen idol
And around his virgin feet lie
Worshippers like fallen angels.
If weakness were innocence, they sigh.

The sun melts the fat of arm and thigh
And with the bones left by sacrifice,
Man's portion, the child walks and cries:
Let go Father, your hands are ice.

—Michael R. Whit