

# Gen-X Meets Gen-Y

## Youth Perceptions and Concerns about the Future

### A Review of the Literature



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## Introduction

The purpose of this overview is to examine the concerns and future perceptions of young people today. I will be focusing on what are commonly referred to as Generations X and Y. What I am broadly exploring is the commonalities and differences as expressed in the literature, in the attitudes, aspirations and concerns of young people in these generations. What values do they hold and what do they fear in their perceptions of the future, both for their individual selves and for their collective group. Included in the review will be sections on general views regarding personal and professional futures, influence of media along with the influence of culture and gender on future perceptions and future time orientation. I will conclude with recommendations for further targeted study in this area.

## Defining a generation

There is not much agreement on what precise time segment each 'generation' refers to. Some consider those born after 1980 as Generation Y, others consider them those born between 1976 -1996 and yet others, those born between 1977-1997. The generation prior to them was referred to as Generation X. This again has variously been defined as those born between 1965-1980 or 1960-1980. Those born between 1945 and 1965 are referred to as the baby boomer generation. These definitions are rather fluid and few years in one direction or the other does not deem an individual specifically in one category or the other. Note, that I will be using terms such as young adults, young people and late adolescence interchangeably to refer to individuals from these generations. The focus will mostly be on those currently in their twenties and teens. Since some members of Generation Y are still in school, references will also be made to students, academic achievement and educational aspirations.

In general, Generation X-ers have been characterized by their materialism, cynicism and pessimism (Miles, 1997). Reasons for this cynicism and pessimism are diverse. They include economic prospects as well as societal problems such as crime and environmental destruction (Arnett, 2000). Coupland (1991) coined the term Generation X, in his novel about three rootless people in their mid to late twenties and their reluctance to make the role transitions associated with the transition into adulthood (e.g. marriage, long term occupation etc.). The novel generated a lot of attention and commentary and the term tended to be associated with those born after 1965. This generation is depicted as daunted by the mixed economic prospects that they will face in the workplace, by the personal debt they will accumulate by the time they leave higher education and by the national debt that has been left to them by previous generations.

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With 70 million members, Generation Y is almost as large a demographic group in the United States as the baby boomers, a group that boasts upwards of 76 million individuals. The group is also sometimes referred to as the Millennials or the Echo-Boomers. The older members of

Generation Y, consisting of those individuals born between 1976 and 1995, are entering the workforce now (Alch, 2000). Well informed and media-savvy, echo boomers supposedly display a strong work ethic and have grown up understanding the new digital economy. They are comfortable with changes brought about by the new technology and e-commerce (Alch, 2000). More than any previous generation, they are becoming conversant with a communications revolution transforming business, education, health care, entertainment, government, and every other institution in our society (Alch, 2000).

For the older generation, the Matures, some of the most significant markers of their time are the Depression, the New Deal, World War II, and the GI Bill. For Boomers they include the Great Society, general economic prosperity and the expansion of suburbia, Nixon, color TV, and sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. For the current crop of young people, Generation X [and Generation Y], they include divorce, AIDS, Sesame Street, MTV, crack cocaine, Game Boy, and the PC (Miles, 1997).

Thus millennials are experiencing a different kind of childhood than their Boomer and X'er predecessors. For baby boomers (birth years 1946-1964), families were stable but beginning to crumble; for Gen X (1965-1985), family stability was falling; Millennial children are now experiencing increasing family stability as the surrounding culture renews its appreciation of-and support for-the family unit (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The parents of boomers were "relaxed" in their nurturing, and parents of X'ers were "underprotective." (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In contrast, parents of the Millennials began to "tighten" up, watching over their kids almost nonstop. As a result, the Millennials are growing up feeling more confident in themselves than did previous generations. Add to this confidence the fact that, as a group, the Millennials "are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse" than any generation in living memory, and you have the formula for a potentially very powerful group of people (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Howe and Strauss (2000) seem to suggest that the Millennials indeed are a fortunate and efficacious group. However, given the increasing disparities in the world, even in developed countries like the United States (which has the greatest disparities among rich and poor in the developed world), these generalizations are hard to accept. There are certainly more individuals who are educated but that does not necessarily mean they have relatively better lives or means compared to their parents.

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Many analysts support the position that X-ers and Y-ers came out of a different history and with a different set of coping skills and expectations than earlier generations. For Boomers, being a young, single adult was short lived-usually a transition period spent earning an education or doing military service. In contrast, today's youth are likely to remain single throughout their 20s and early 30s, which delays the onset of parenting. Since they have been employed since high school, many place a different importance on family life (Ritchie, 1995a). Furthermore, subgroups may exist within a generational group. Little information is available for subgroups within Generation Y, but according to Benezra (1995), subgroups within Generation X are: (1) Yup & Comers, the 28 percent who have the highest levels of

income and education and the brightest future; (2) Bystanders, the 37 percent who are predominately female minority members, have the lowest disposable income, and regard status brands as an important means of expression; (3) Playboys, the 19 percent who are predominately single white males and are characterized as self-absorbed, fun loving, impulsive, and living on the edge; and (4) Drifters, the 16 percent who are closest to the Gen-X stereotype and are the least educated. They seek security, status, and look for brands that offer sense of belonging and self-esteem. In contrast to Benezra's four subgroups, Koss-Feder (1998) uses three subgroups-- college and graduate students, up-and-coming-professionals, and married couples, some of whom already have young children (Wolburg & Pokrywncski, 2001).

According to Bronfenbrenner et al (1996) the problems facing the US are twofold. One is the fading belief in the American dream with slowed economic growth. The second is a more social issue with what they call an 'unraveling of the social fabric' and the conflicting messages about values. They raise concerns about community, civility and safety but are hard pressed to define what causes this decline and how to address it.

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Regardless of image, labor statistics show that the current 18-24-year-olds-- whether they are grouped as the youngest members of Generation X or the oldest members of Generation Y--belong to the best-educated generation in American history. They are also the most culturally diverse, with as many as 30 percent members of minorities. About 25 percent grew up in single-family households and 75 percent had a working mother (Neuborne and Kerwin, 1999). Many are extremely literate but take a cynical attitude toward government, believing that the system as a whole, including social security, pensions, health care, and job security, will not be there for them (Thau, 1996). There is also a general decline in social trust, "whether that is trust in their fellow citizens, in established institutions, or in elected officials" (Halstead, 1999). Here too, it is hard to conclude how universal these feelings are, what the causes of these attitudes and behaviors might be, and how they might influence the future.

## **Views of a generation and perceptions of the future**

### **Personal and professional**

Dramatic changes have taken place during the past 30 years for young people in their teens and twenties in American society. As recently as 1970 the median age for marriage was 21 for females and 23 for males; by 1996 it had risen to 25 for females and 27 for males (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997). The proportion of young people obtaining a higher education also rose steeply from 48% to 60 % by 1993 (Arnett, 2000). The young teens and twenties is no longer a period in which the typical pattern is to enter and settle into long-term adult roles. On the contrary it has become a period characterized for many by a high degree of change, experimentation and instability as they explore a variety of

possibilities in love, work and worldviews. Bronfenbrenner et al (1996) found, from the national longitudinal study of Youth, (NLSY)<sup>1</sup> that increasingly high school seniors are less optimistic about their plans for the future.

Nurmi (1989) suggests that the prototype of goal setting behavior among adolescents includes getting an education, getting a job, then getting married and finally building up a material base for life. Arnett (2000) found that youth in Generation X viewed their individual futures optimistically and believed that their lives would be as good or better than their parents' in financial, career achievements, personal relationships and overall quality of life. Although 55 percent were pessimistic about the nation's economic prospects in the next 10 years, 89 percent of young people were optimistic about their own financial prospects over the same period (Thau, 1996). Interview responses in the study conducted by Arnett (2000) indicated that many participants emphasized personal relationships, especially marriage, as the foundation of their future happiness. However, regarding the future of their generation as a whole, they were pessimistic. For example, he cites one 23-year old subject from his study as saying the following:

*"...I think we are kind of in some ways the lost generation. We all were brought up to think, " You finish high school, you go to college, you get a degree and you go out to work," just like our parents did. Then when we get to college we realize we don't know what we want. I would say probably 7 out of ten of my friends do that right now; they've already had their degrees and have jobs totally unrelated to their field..."*

It seems paradoxical that the individuals would have a positive view of themselves yet a negative view of the future of the generation. In general, though, it is accepted that most people have an optimistic bias towards themselves. Thus, one possibility for this contradiction might be that youth do not perceive the negative prospects for the generation as specifically affecting them. Alternatively, it could raise the validity of terms like 'generation' and how universally people identify with age mates in terms of values, perceptions of the future and concerns. Both studies cited above have very region specific subject samples whose characteristics might not match perfectly with what we define as a generation, if indeed such a classification is useful.

Interesting in his study of largely youth from a Mid-western town, Arnett (2000), found that social class background was inversely related to their views of their personal futures—those from relatively low social class backgrounds were even more confident than those from relatively high social class backgrounds that their lives would be better than their parents, financially as well as in other respects.

According to Wallace, (2001) while youth of Generation X lived through the loss of lifetime employment within a corporation, those of Generation Y-ers began their careers with the assumption that they will be changing jobs frequently. As a result, new

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<sup>1</sup> NLSY is the national Longitudinal Survey of Youth a study of over 12000 youth ages 14-22 first interviewed in 1979 and every year since. The sample is overrepresentative of minority and low income families.

college recruits frequently enter the workplace with a short-term career outlook, without any goals of developing within their job or even within their first company. Wallace, (2001) suggests that Generation Y workers will transform the workplace, just like the workers from the generations before them. They will bring technical skills, a strong entrepreneurial outlook, a deep-seated social consciousness, and, like every "new" generation, a healthy dose of questioning and change. These young people are also characterized by high parental involvement in their lives on career decisions, a phenomenon that college recruiters and advertisers have been aware for years. In a study of 2500 students over 70 % said that their parents had an influence of their choice of first jobs and careers (Leonard, 2001). A recent survey by Arthur Andersen, titled "Bringing Girls into Corporate America," found that teenage girls are wholly unimpressed with corporate life. Instead, girls are more likely to express a preference for a career in public service or in a small business (Wallace, 2001).

Stiles et al (1993) conducted a cross-cultural study of 522 Dutch and American youth regarding their views on future work and leisure activities. These countries were chosen by the authors for the changes experienced by the countries in the last thirty years including greater employment of women outside the home, growth of leisure activities, extension of time spent on education and a delay of entry into the workforce. In the U.S. sample the ideal person was more often drawn as being at work (44.9%) as compared with the Dutch sample (20.4%). U.S youth seemed more likely to glamorize work and linked work with success, achievement and wealth. Dutch youth seemed to be more interested in the quality of life with drawings depicting sports, relaxation, attractiveness and humor. Twenty-five years ago the findings were reversed with U.S youth being more leisure oriented than the Dutch (Stiles, 2002).

How do the youth today relate to relationships? Weissbourd (2003) suggests that there is a fragmentation of attention and consciousness and a greater sense of transience not just about careers but relationships as well. However, there are also some positives including improved awareness in the relationships across race and class over the last 30 years (Personal communication, R. Weissbourd, 2003). Bronfenbrenner et al (1996) in their NLSY study found some interesting trends for families. They found that the majority of adult children brought up by a divorced parent ended up as married parents in adulthood. Adults raised by an unmarried single parent showed a reverse pattern, with the majority becoming single parents. Vanzetti and Duck (1996) also document the decline in both fertility and fecundity in the developed world. The decline in fecundity has been attributed to individuals choosing to have children later in life and often having trouble conceiving then. They speculate on the impact of the increased ingestion of various chemicals and artificial substances introduced into modern life and their effect on the course of relationships and raising children. Other concerns include the presence of chronic illnesses as people live longer. Different conditions, primarily affect different groups: arthritis affects more blacks and osteoporosis affects more whites and Asians; Whites and women have the highest life expectancies and the gender gap increases with age etc. Furthermore, the need for long-term care is also rising along with the proportion of retired individuals to productive workers (Bronfenbrenner et al, 1996).

This generation is also seeing greater connectivity across space and time due to the enhanced availability of technology. It has been speculated that this might mean a greater tenousness in relationships. Yet Vanzetti and Duck (1996) conclude that contrary to the expectation that technology creates isolation, it actually increases the desire for people to meet, retain and maintain contact. Let us now look at how media and technology are being used and affect youth today.

## **Media, entertainment and technology**

The pessimism of Generation X as a whole, relates to the media contributing to distorted and depressing images of environmental problems like the ozone layer, natural disasters, pollution growth, AIDS, hunger and poverty (Arnett, 2002). In many respects Generation Y members are similar to Generation X, particularly in their pragmatic outlook on life; however, differences between the groups have been noted. Generation Y members have been characterized as less cynical, more optimistic, more idealistic, more inclined to value tradition, and more similar to Boomers than Gen-Xers (Stapinski, 1999). Furthermore, they are expected to be a more "activist group" than Gen-Xers (Kapner, 1997).

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Having grown up in a more media-saturated, brand-conscious world than their parents, Gen-Yers encounter advertisements in different places than their parents and are believed to respond to them differently. Analysts believe that the years of intense marketing efforts aimed at Gen-Yers have taught them to assume the worst about companies trying to coax them into buying something. Advertisements meant to look youthful and fun may come off as merely opportunistic to the Gen-Y consumer, as PepsiCo's "Generation Next" campaign was viewed. Analysts believe that Gen-Y responds better to humor, irony, and the "unvarnished" truth, as Sprite has done with advertisements that parody celebrity endorsers and carry the tagline, "Image is nothing. Thirst is everything. Obey your thirst." (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001).

What defines Generation Y compared to the earlier generation is a pervasive sense of political incorrectness, brashness and a desire for instant gratification. The rise in popularity of rapper Eminem might be an appropriate symbol of this group's expression of themselves. This is also reflected in the advertisements aimed at this generation and the shows on MTV such as 'jackass'. Television is merely another spoke in a personal media hub that includes the Internet, cellphones, pagers, songfile sharing and video games (NY times, 2002). Henry Jenkins, Director of Comparative Media Studies at MIT says that such blithe nihilism appeals to a post baby boom generation because they were raised in an environment of unrelenting political correctness. He says that for this generation political incorrectness is a release from constraint and violence is a source of comedy because violence will be shocking to authority figures. Their humor comes from images rather than words and thus movies like American Pie become such hits (NY times, 2002).

Today's 18-24-year-olds have spent much more time watching television as children than their parents. Instead of being passive viewers of television, they have become active channel surfers exploring hundreds of options. While their parents found technology dehumanizing and too big, young adults have personalized the technology as it developed (Ritchie, 1995b). Estimates show that young adults are one-third less likely than their parents to read newspapers, believing that there are quicker, better, ways to stay informed (Stepp, 1996). Some analysts suggest that journalists have alienated the group by devaluing almost every significant part of the youth culture and failing to represent their point of view in important issues (Stepp, 1996). Others say that editors wrongly assumed young people wanted "McNews" and failed to provide in-depth coverage of news with serious information (Wu, 1997). Young adults represent only 7 percent of total newspaper readership and turn instead to radio, TV (especially MTV and Fox), and magazines such as Spin, Vibe, and Rolling Stone (Reese, 1997).

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Those who do not identify with positive Generation X traits (those who feel they are not highly intelligent or methodical) rated advertising depictions high. Perhaps intelligence is not a quality often depicted in advertisements due to the increased use of "under the radar" techniques and zany, irreverent humor. Consumers with highly extroverted traits also relate well to depictions in advertising and in television, suggesting that television advertisements may be a particularly potent combination for them. Magazine depictions appear to be more meaningful for the less introverted types, and though low introversion is not precisely the same as extroversion, there may be some overlap. (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001).

The current generation has been increasingly detached from traditional sources of cultural influence like families, churches, or schools. They avoid conspicuous consumption, since "keeping up with the Joneses" has never been their dream" (Tieszen, 1996). Many of their neighbors are from different cultures, speak different languages, and hold different values.

Much research on generational characteristics attempt to generalize the characteristics of a generation at the cost of the subtle differences and complexities that distinguish the experiences of individuals from communities and culture that are not white, mainstream and middle class. The following section will explore some of these nuances.

## **Culture and future perception**

Within the coming decade, fully a third of the youth of Generation Y will come from language- or racial/ethnic-minority families. By 2050, they will represent at least 50% of the U.S. public school classroom population. Substantial numbers of them will come from impoverished backgrounds and families with high rates of no or low school attendance (Brown & Hughes, 1999). Cultural norms influence adolescents'

expectations for the future by setting community standards for normative and desired developmental goals. Parents and other family members also influence future orientation through a variety of mechanisms including modeling, direct socialization, setting norms for achievement and communicating expectations (McCabe and Barnett, 2000).

Zimbardo (1994) finds that minority and low-income groups are particularly vulnerable to espousing a limited future outlook with societal problems such as high unemployment levels, racism and current and past experiences with oppression, often restricting their future outlook. According to Zimbardo (1994) and Nurmi (1991), members of disadvantaged cultural groups often avoid planning their future or exhibit uncertainty regarding the future, limiting planning to immediate goals and a focus on the present. Zimbardo (1994) further suggests that “to develop into a future-oriented person requires a learned sense of trust in others, along with a set of beliefs about the predictability and controllability of people and nature.” He suggests that this requires growing up in a family and a community that are marked by some degree of stability-economic, social, political and psychological. These attributes are alien to the poor, the transient, the migrant, abused and neglected (Zimbardo, 1994).

Zimbardo’s rather simplistic generalization misses many subtle realities of young people’s development. Within the African-American community, Honora (2002) found that students who had more long-term goals and expectations reported a more positive and encouraging home environment than students who stated fewer and less extended goals and expectations. Parents appeared to shape future outlook among children by acting as models regarding what should occur in the future (Honora, 1989). Nurmi (1989) found that adolescents who reported a negative climate at home had fewer plans than adolescents who reported a positive family climate.

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Asakawa & Csikszentmihalyi (1998) found that in Asian-Americans this future perception manifested differently. The authors explored the differences in the aspirations of Asian-American youth and Caucasian youth. They found that when engaged in ‘work-like’ activities and activities that were important for future goals, Asian-American students reported more positive experiences relative to Caucasian American adolescents. The examination of parental practices concerning children’s academic activities indicated that Asian-American parents structured their children’s lives to facilitate academic success and at the same time they provided their children with (or supported their children’s autonomy) in actual activities. The parents structured their children’s life for academic success more or less one-sidedly. Then they left their children alone to achieve the goals by themselves. The authors suggested that the internalization of cultural values like hard work and high achievement was a possible factor for promoting the educational success of Asian-Americans. Furthermore, education was seen as the only means for social advancement for migrant families with limited resources and social isolation (Asakawa & Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Honora (2002) particularly emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of culture and sociohistorical context in shaping young people’s perceptions of the future.

There is wide agreement that African-American children growing up under conditions of urban poverty are at a greater risk for a number of negative psychosocial outcomes including psychological distress, substance use, delinquency, teen pregnancy and failure to complete high school. Researchers have become increasingly interested in identifying factors that promote future resilience among children exposed to stressful conditions. According to Wyman et al. (1992), future orientation might be one such protective factor for at-risk children. Several studies have shown that adolescents who were raised in high risk environments but who maintain positive expectations for the future and engage in future planning are less likely to experience psychological and social problems later in life, than those who do not. Both Werner and Smith (1982; 1992) have found positive expectations for the future to differentiate between resilient and non-resilient children exposed to high levels of stress. Quinton et al (1993) found future planning during adolescence to predict fewer conduct problems in adulthood among a sample of institutionally reared children. Other studies have found future planning and positive expectations for the future to predict upward social mobility, positive socio-emotional adjustment and internal locus of control (Clausen, 1991).

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In a study of low-income African-American school children, McCabe and Barnett (2000) found that the students were more detailed, optimistic and realistic about their future careers rather than their romantic and family relationships. They felt that they had more control over careers rather than relationships. It appeared that the youth had given a great deal of thought to their careers, had developed a fair deal of sophistication in planning for their careers and were fairly optimistic about them.

However, the same youth were less sure that their personal lives would be successful. They were less certain about what to expect and were less able to plan realistically for these future relationships. This pattern of findings suggests that low-income African-American youth are very similar in their future orientations across domains of life functioning measured by this study: career, family and romantic relationships. However these findings are also disturbing. One quarter of the youth could think of nothing positive about their future romantic relationships. This may be an overall negative view of relationships and family prospects. Not only are youth more focused on career than relationships, but they are not expecting their relationships to be positive experiences (McCabe & Barnett, 2000).

In another study on future perceptions of 400 ninth grade Latino youth, Yowell (2002) explored the implications of student's possible selves. Possible selves were defined as hopeful self (anything one wants to be), expected selves (what one think really will happen) and fearful selves (what students are afraid might happen or don't want happening to them). In this study the best predictor of school performance and dropout rates was the student's perception of fearful self. Expectations are found to play a role in a students' performance, and discrepancies between the two are found to be more so in the case of minority students (Yowell, 2002). What was salient in this study and recommended for policy by the authors was that regardless of the social desirability of

student responses, students' understanding of the processes or steps necessary to fulfill those goals was limited.

In an overview of the state of Americans, Bronfenbrenner et al (1996) suggest that the rising rate of youth criminal involvement, the dominance of black males in prison and its potential to reduce the lifetime earnings of many young men is an issue that deserves scrutiny and attention. They suggest that the average economic prospects for black men would almost certainly worsen and crime despite its risks might attract men and women for its quality of instant gratification. They warn of the potential for racial conflict over crime in the upcoming years.

## **Gender and future perception**

Thirty years ago the standard biography for boys was to complete their education by late adolescence, find a partner, find work and start a household. For girls the standard biography was to move directly from school into marriage and full time housekeeping (Stiles, 1993). Although this has changed considerably with time, adolescents still cling to more traditional views regarding gender-typed occupations (Stiles, 1993).

Stiles et al (2002) found that the number of occupations listed was far greater for adolescents in the Netherlands than in the United States and that girls listed more occupations than did boys, but considered fewer occupations as actual possibilities for themselves. Prior research has also suggests that females tend to exhibit a more limited future outlook than males, set fewer goals, are more pessimistic about their future and tend to focus on more immediate goals (Greene & Wheatley, 1992; Nurmi, 1989). The goals and expectations of females as compared to those of males are informed by family and other interpersonal relationships. In contrast to males, females often report a 'double load' or a rapid pileup of family and career transitions (Greene and Wheatley, 1992). Females expect to balance and negotiate more life transitions and to have less time to accomplish goals than males (Greene and Wheatley, 1992). Honora (2002) finds that two factors contribute to the negative view of the future by females. One is the belief, relative to males that, how they negotiate life transitions is of greater consequence to their recognized status as adults. The second is the anticipated 5 –10 year interruption in their career goals to assume family responsibilities.

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A number of studies have shown that African-American teenage girls who have high educational and career aspirations and who believe that early pregnancy would disrupt their future plans are at reduced risk for teen pregnancy even when other factors are held constant including family background, age of first sexual intercourse, neighborhood characteristics and use of contraceptives (Dawson, 1986; Schwab-Zabin & Hayward, 1993).

Honora (2002) studied the goals and expectations in four categories, academic, employment, sports/leisure, and marriage/family in African-American youth. On average, students hoped to finish school and get a job before getting married. However she found that girls set more goals in the areas of education, employment, marriage and family. Boys set more goals than girls in the areas of sports and leisure. She attributes the limited goal setting and future outlook manifested by the African American youth as reflective of the larger representation of these youth in the crime, violence and learning disabilities. Thus, African American males may be exploring their future options within societal and academic arenas that constrain their beliefs regarding what is possible in the future. Contributing to the differences in future outlook was family. Goals and achievements were shaped by family and significant others, who served as role models for what to expect in the future (Honora, 2002). Gender was thus found to be a critical component in understanding the future outlook of African Americans.

Bronfenbrenner et al. (1996) suggest that boys growing up in poor families were more likely than girls to drop out of school. However the recurrence of poverty across generations was higher for women than for young men. This has significance because the percentage of single parent mothers has been rising, especially among families in poverty and it is primarily women rather than men who bring up the next generation, especially in the early years. Bronfenbrenner et al (1996) found that optimism about the future was also related to the mother's level of education. Mothers with more education had children who showed greater optimism for the future.

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In majority group populations, studies have found adolescent boys and girls to differ in their future orientations towards various life domains. And these differences appear to be highly dependent on the cultural context (Nurmi, 1991). Studies conducted more than fifteen years ago generally found boys to be more oriented toward future careers than girls. According to Nurmi (1991) however, as women have increasingly joined the workforce over the past several decades, sex differences in future orientation toward occupation have disappeared and studies conducted within the last fifteen years have generally not found sex differences in this domain.

In terms of boys and their attitudes and needs for relationships, Hallden (1998) did not find a difference between boys and girls. Her study focused on the narratives of boyhood and fatherhood and the sense of connection between generations. Unlike Gilligan who emphasized relationship as central more to girls than to boys, Hallden (1998) did not find this difference. It is to be noted that her study was conducted with Swedish youth and this might be playing a role in the findings since Gilligan's study involved American girls.

## Conclusions and further research

There are clearly many issues that emerge from investigating the future perceptions of young people today. Boulding & Boulding (1995) predict that young people and children will increasingly demand and have a say in decisions regarding their life, lifestyle and spaces where they live. Yet over the past two decades the percentage of children in poverty has doubled from 1.1 million to 2.8 million, the highest of any developed country. Given this and other disparities in the experiences of youth, the question arises of how useful a tag like 'Generation X' or 'Generation Y' is in identifying the needs, concerns and aspirations of youth today. Some suggest that encouraging a sense of the future is a protective factor for children. We saw in the literature how numerous factors interact with an individual's development to form their values, perception and attitudes of the future. These included modeling in the families, siblings, peers, gender, values of the culture, media messages, kinship group, region and race all influence how a young person comes to view their future, their own competence and the possibilities in the world for them. Bronfenbrenner (1981) considers human development as a process of interaction between environmental factors and the person. His model includes Microsystems (family, school, peers, etc.), mesosystems (connections between microsystems), exosystems (social systems that the person is not directly involved with), macrosystems (culture lived in) and chronosystems (sociohistorical circumstances and life course). Thus, to truly understand the future perceptions and concerns of youth, it is important to take an interdisciplinary perspective while keeping in mind the highly interactive nature of these influences.

I will summarize some of the areas that need further research.

1. One of the key problems with much of the literature that generalizes cohorts into a generation is, missing the particular issues of region, ethnicity, socio-economic class, gender, race etc. that often create barriers for individual aspiration. More international and inter-ethnic studies are needed to fill this gap. Future perceptions vary as a factor of many cultural and socio-economic factors including region, race, class etc. A more complex approach that distinguishes between the nuances of different groups within a generation is required. This is particularly pertinent for minority members who might not represent the so-called majority trends of a generation. The literature presents some alarming trends for African American males and their future.

2. Other areas that emerged from the literature are the need for bridging future goals or future perceptions with education about the reality of the process. Many young people seem to have hopes with no clear idea of the roads to achieve these goals. Since we hear so often of the media savvy nature of youth today, innovative use of media and technology might be useful to help educate youth in this regard, rather than using traditional tools alone.

3. It was evident that role models both within the family and outside play into the future perceptions of youth. It would be pertinent and a useful policy guide to know who are young people's role models today: To what extent do they change with age

and what do they tell us about their future aspirations and perceptions? Furthermore, how does this differ by gender? Despite the decline in stark gender differences, the life course of girls often differs from boys when they decide to start families and raise children. Thus, it would be useful to know how girls' future perceptions change with these responsibilities and changes.

4. Studies have also found that students display more clarity regarding future perceptions of career rather than interpersonal relationships. This is clearly an area lacking in education policy today and needs more systematic evaluation to empower and enable youth to negotiate relationships in healthy and growth-promoting ways. Since parents play such an important role, possible avenues could involve family education or intervention rather than addressing children alone. Future orientation has been found to be a protective factor for children and youth deemed at risk. Helping disadvantaged and at-risk youth develop a future orientation as an ongoing process could be a valuable intervention to explore and study.

5. An oft-repeated message of the characteristics of youth today is that of transience, instant gratification and the role of the media in perpetuating this set of behaviors. How valid are these claims? Do youth feel without roots and support? How does the use of enhanced communication technologies affect their sense of support, efficacy and competence? What are the threats they experience? These of course might be different based on the demographic characteristics of the individual. However, the relationship between technology, communication, media and human relationships/psychological development still needs to be explored. Furthermore, with the increasing connectivity of people around the world and globalization of media and communication, future perceptions and studying future orientations need to move beyond national boundaries. Influences on youth transcend their local surroundings today. Although these influences would be complex and hard to pinpoint, they nevertheless merit study and research to enhance our understanding of where the youth of today are headed.

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How Generations X and Y Will Reshape Higher Education  
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Page Two

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