

Why the X Generation? A personal perspective

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“Give me the child of 7 and I will show you the man” – the origins of this quote are disputed but the applicability I believe has deep resonance in the world of suicide prevention, especially when the world they have been prepared for moves the goalposts.

Age is just a number

Working in the field of suicide prevention since before the turn of the century I have witnessed more than my fair share of sweeping statements, confusing statistics and utter nonsense’s; some of the former and the latter I have fell foul of myself before I learned the often underrated wisdom of listening and learning before speaking. But by being so entrenched in this field one of the most overlooked facts is that, for both men and women, the age of the person most vulnerable to undertaking a suicidal act has been shifting over time. Not sporadically but in a slow, steady and clearly distinguishable wave. This *wave* is known to many as Generation X.

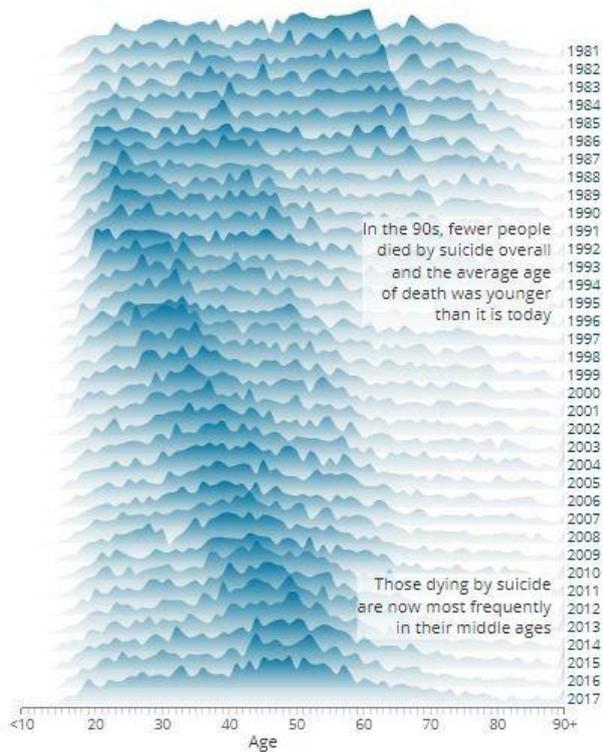
Who is the X Generation?

Between the post war *Baby Boomers* and the mid-80’s born *Millennials* sat *Generation X* – people born between the mid 1960’s and the early 80’s. A demographic that is often referred to as the MTV Generation, followers of Grunge or Hip-Hop and viewed by many as slackers, cynical and disaffected during the 90’s and obsessed with the concept of work/life balance today. They are the generation of the Sinclair home computers, desktop word-processors, the pager, the brick sized mobile phones, the CD, the DVD, the answering machine, the Walkman, mixtapes recorded directly from the radio, the video store and the shopping centre.

Recognition

On August 13th 2019, the Office of National Statistics produced a report entitled [Middle-aged generation most likely to die by suicide and drug poisoning](#) – although devastating in nature, I was relieved to see overt recognition of the challenge of Generation X in black and white from the ONS. This is because I remember all too well the mid 90’s when the age highlighted for being most vulnerable to suicidal acts was in the mid 20’s and by the turn of the century it was the 30 year olds, in 2010 we were concentrating on those in the 40 year age bracket and now, it is those in the late 40’s age bracket – my age bracket – my Generation X

Number of suicides by single year of age, England and Wales, death between 1981 and 2017

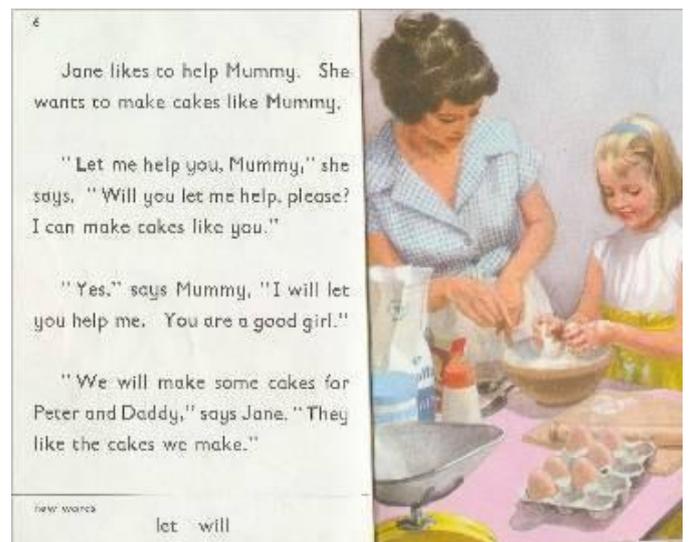


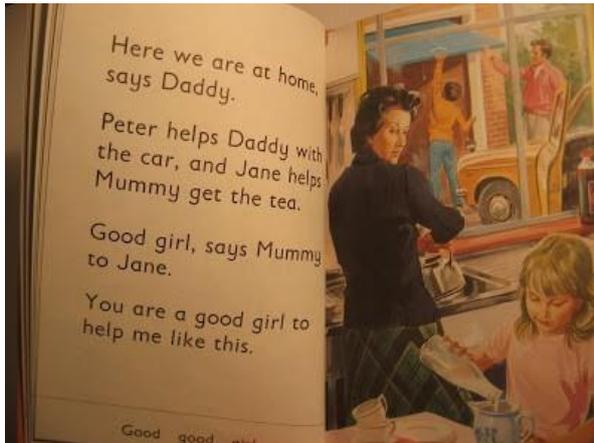
Throughout the report there are relationships being lightly drawn between deprivation and suicide rates as well as drug poisonings and suicide. This phenomenon is not only restricted to England and Wales though as it is noted it is equally relevant in the USA as well as Canada. However, even though there is reference made to Generation X, there is no reference to another set of crucial levers that I believe has a huge influence on suicides amongst this generation being the effect on individuals being socialized according to the values of our Baby Boomer parents and the impact of socialization in a world that for many countries changed significantly. A world that no longer lay in-sync with ideals and values of Generation X. It should be noted though, that the ONS writers cannot be held to account for this – after all, this concept is floating into the arms of sociological theory – not a place where ONS understanding has a strong allegiance.

Societies part

From a personal perspective (which this whole article is), socialization of Generation X by the Baby-Boomer generation can be best encapsulated between the pages of the Ladybird “Peter and Jane” series.

From the toys we were given as boys and girls our futures were being laid out before us. Peter with his crane, toy soldiers, diecast cars and train set and Jane with her dolls, kitchen playset and toy pram. Peter helping his Dad with DIY and Jane baking cakes with mum...for the Dad and Peter.





Peter giving Dad a hand with securing the car whilst Jane helps her mum to get the tea. For many people of Generation X, these publications 'helped' to mould our identities, define our anticipated roles in society as well as subdue any alternative 'outlandish' ways of being that sat outside these specific frameworks of how to be a man and a woman in the making.

In addition to the written word for Generation X (including Jacky annual for the girls and Victor for the boys), further reinforcement from peers and family members served to reinforce the mould for what we represented in adulthood. We become the products of 'hard working', sole bread-winning fathers and grand-fathers in the manufacturing industries who never spoke of the war, never uttered their feelings, never asked for help but instead spoke through their actions and found their leisure pursuits traditionally best served by the local public house on the evening and weekends. On the other side were our mothers and grandmothers who stayed at home, 'did their motherly duty', patched us up, cooked, cleaned and generally served us and our male seniors; All of us in preparation for our well-defined futures. And, to be honest, it was all good, because that was reality for many of the Generation X's as we knew nothing else – and the repercussions of a short, sharp, smack to get us back on track reinforced this reality as the only reality available.

Political shifts

But the 70's and the 80's also saw wider upheavels – it saw legal changes in respect of divorce laws and sex discrimination; it witnessed Thatcherism and it's push for home ownership; fragmentation through the miners strikes leading to the demise of power across traditional working class represented unions, the painful shift from the traditional UK based manufacturing stronghold and mass unemployment; a passionate ground-swell of rights for women going into further education and beyond and a strong will to push through the glass ceiling of business as well as a belief that both parents can 'bring home the bacon' and with that came the 'latch-key kids' who were desperately looking to work out how they fitted.

I believe most passionately that because of these wider societal shifts and many more (unmentioned but as valid) besides, Generation X were provided with one framework with a clear purpose yet found themselves growing up in a society where this framework and societally defined purpose became for many, unfit for purpose – it became redundant. Adaptation to these new set of rules has been unbelievably hard for many Generation X women and men with for too many fatal consequences.

Gender identity

For me, I got lucky if lucky is the word. Until the age of 11 I thought I knew reality and knew my purpose. Then my Mum upset the family apple-cart and went to University to study Sociology, something back then that warranted a column in the local town's newspaper when she obtained her degree. The (often perceived) change in the status-quo at home contributed to a number of



outcomes – some unfortunate (divorce being one of them) and some fortunate, being mainly an opportunity to question what had recently been unspoken territory nor up for negotiation until that point. But for many family members, their view of how the world worked was entrenched in them until their last day – socialization is a very powerful force indeed. When I was 20, I was made redundant from the warehouse I was employed at. I loved my job, made some excellent life-long friends and feel that my life benefitted hugely from this experience. But for me, my next step was to look at a different direction of vocational travel. During Sunday Roast with my family, I told my Grandad that I wanted to go to University and study to be a Social Worker and his well intentioned response will always stay with me....

“A social worker? That’s no job for you. You should be a soldier like your brother or a welder. A proper mans job.”

Now, I loved my Grandad to bits with his no-nonsense view of the world, but thankfully on that occasion I didn’t take his advice although sometimes when I look at what Social Workers have to deal with on a day to day basis I often wonder whether his advice had some legs.

Eyes on the horizon

Today, as part of the [SCHEMA: An Approach to Suicide Prevention](#) training and as part of the ManMade Peer Support Programme we run, we set aside time to discuss and reflect on the wider influences that may have an impact on Generation X regarding suicide – we recognise deprivation, we recognise substance misuse but we also recognise that suicide is not only about trying to understand the individual and their perceived problems – it’s much bigger than this and goes much deeper. It requires us to look at ourselves, our histories, our societies and what drives us in truly understanding why people may take their own lives. The challenge then is that when we have come to a clearer conclusion as to why Generation X is at risk we then need to look at what can be done about it – without taking our eyes off the generations to come – an opportunity to use what we have learned to make all our futures brighter.

Written by Terry Rigby: Company Director of [Forward For Life](#) 2019