

Age-Cohort Analysis

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Age-Cohort Analysis is one of several methods futurists use to try to anticipate the future. It is based on the fact that different "age cohorts" (also sometimes called "generations")--people born and growing up during the same time span, and in the same place--often share ideas and beliefs about the world which are very different from the ideas and beliefs held in common by members of age cohorts only a few years older or younger than they are.

Thus, when an age cohort with one "worldview" retires and leaves political and economic power, and a new age cohort with a very different "worldview" comes in, the world may change because, holding different beliefs, the actions and policies of the newer cohort differ from those of the older cohorts.

Here is the way it works, using the US as an example.

Scientists are becoming increasingly certain that the brief period of time from conception to age three or so are crucial in determining much of future of a human adult. The chemicals in the mother's bloodstream that pass through the blood of the fetus she is carrying strongly influence many physical, behavioral, and intellectual characteristics of that fetus after it is born, and throughout the rest of its life. Harmful substances may affect the development of the brain of the fetus, for example, thus severely limiting the ability of the child to develop intellectually later in life. Other substances that the fetus receives from the mother, on the other hand, assure the probability of normality, or perhaps even exceptional abilities later on in life.

After a child is born, how that infant is reared--the amount of handling, loving, caring, diverse but safe stimulation, physical abuse, wholesome or unwholesome food, and all the rest--greatly influence how the child will thrive or struggle later as a youth and as an adult.

Many of the things a child experiences are unique to that child. But many other things are common to children born at the same time and place.

Children born in a war zone experience many deprivations and horrors in common. The trauma of these "galvanizing experiences," as they might be called, accompany them throughout the rest of their lives, defining them as an "age cohort". On the other hand, children just a few years older or younger who grew up in safe, secure, peaceful communities view the world quite differently, and react to threats or dangers differently. They are a different age cohort.

Children born into and growing up in times of famine, poverty, forced mobility, loss of parents or other loved ones may never recover from those early galvanizing experiences.

On the other hand, the cohort of spoiled, largely male only-children, born to doting parents in present-day China will certainly view the world differently from children born to large families in those many parts of the world where large families still predominate.

In the US, the cohort which grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and then became deeply involved in the Second World War (often termed the "G. I. Generation"), carried with them forever the memory of profound scarcity and deprivation, the horror of war, and then the sweet triumph of complete victory and global dominance--tempered by the death of so many friends and loved ones. They had a "can do" attitude towards almost anything, having been tested, tempered, and triumphant. They earned and deserved the label "The Great Generation".

But other cohorts, born only a few years later, never experienced significant economic deprivation or war of any kind. They only know, and expect as a natural right, peace and prosperity without their having to struggle for it.

Childrearing fashions change too. One of the largest cohorts ever born in the US--the so-called "Baby Boomers" born between the late 40s and 1960--were all basically reared by parents who followed the advice of Dr. Benjamin Spock in his book, *Baby and Child Care*. The parents of the Baby Boomers were the first to live in suburban isolation usually without experienced grandparents around to guide them. Dr. Spock's book filled a great void, telling them to just let their children "do their own thing," freely, and without restraint. Trust your children's basic instincts.

Yet children born before them in the 1930s-40s were reared in a completely different way--according to "the clock". They were expected to eat at specific times (not sooner or later), to move their bowels on command (and not before or after the command), to take naps and go to bed on an exact moment on the clock, and in general to be disciplined to strict, mechanical, external forces--not to their own whims and internal rhythms.

This "Silent" Generation, born in the 30s and 40s, was also very small in number--in fact, the smallest cohort in American history. Few babies were born, since children were a great burden during the Depression. So they became a tiny, ignored, and heavily-disciplined sliver of humanity sandwiched in between the older, more numerous G. I. cohorts who went off to fight and win World War Two, and the Baby Boom children of the War Heroes

Ironically enough, being small in number, and highly disciplined, the Silent Generation turned out to be doubly blessed: older competitors were often killed in the war, and those who did survive produced many children for whom the Silent Generation could then become teachers, employers, manufacturers, and leaders. Members of the Silent Generation never had to worry about jobs. With the older cohorts weakened by war and a huge number of young people to provide for, there were always jobs for them.

But they then proceeded to block entry into all kinds of jobs for the younger Baby Boomers, who then, with their vast numbers, blocked jobs still more for the much smaller numbers in "Generation X" which followed them.

This kind of thinking--seeing how pre-natal, early natal, and childhood experiences influence the thought and behavior of an entire generation of adults--is called "Age Cohort Analysis."

It is one of several ways futurists try to anticipate changes and continuities in the future.

The World War Two G. I. Generation is rapidly dying off. Soon there will be no one alive who can literally "Remember Pearl Harbor."

A major "galvanizing experience" of the Silent Generation, as well as the Baby Boomers, was the Cold War between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Cold War was the major event shaping, and warping, the lives and lifestyles, of all Americans during the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s.

And then suddenly it ended and can never return. A generation of Americans has been born for whom the Cold War is a trivial curiosity they read about in text books. It has no personal meaning for their lives.

They live in a world totally different from that of the old Cold Warriors. When the Cold Warriors finally die off, and subsequent cohorts take over, they will not see the world through the same lens the Cold Warriors used to see everything. They will literally "live" in a different world.

Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Newt Gingrich, George W. Bush, and Barack Hussein Obama became national leaders without having been war veterans. Indeed, they were never in military service at all. That entire life-shaping experience of military life which conditioned, for better or worse, almost all males and many females (and certainly all major political leaders) for 50 years came to an end.

Bob Dole was the last American to run for the US Presidency by trying to live off of World War Two memories. It just did not work for Dole--there were not enough Americans around who cared deeply about the personal sacrifices he made. And so a person who was arguably a war resister--a draft dodger--and a perfect model of Baby Boom yuppiedom--Bill Clinton--won.

His successor in the White House, George W. Bush, is also a Baby Boomer by birth, but lived a life that kept him immune from the influences of most of the "galvanizing experiences" of his generation. Instead, Bush surrounded himself not with other Boomers and Gen Xers, as Clinton did and as one would expect a Boomer to do. Rather Bush's advisors are throwbacks from his father's Silent Generation. With Bush in the White House, America stepped back two Generations in many ways.

This might not have mattered much had not the attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred. Bush was totally unprepared for these events, and so his Cold Warrior advisors responded in the only way they knew how--massive military retaliation externally and suppression of many fundamental civil rights internally.

Imagine what the response to 9/11 might have been if a "real" Boomer, or even member of Gen X, had been in charge instead!

Yet, in the 2008 presidential election, only one of the main candidates for the presidency was a Gen Xer. All the rest were Boomers--or Silents. But the victor turned out to be a person who broke almost all of the old rules about who could be elected President of the United States. Not only is Obama our first Gen X president but our first African-American president as well--unbelievable only a few years earlier.

It is worth noting however that only one of the members of the US Supreme Court is a Boomer. Guess who it is. All the rest are Silents or GIs. What does this suggest about their decisions?

So what's next? How will the comparatively numerous and tremendously pampered and protected members of the "Millennial" Generation, currently graduating from college, respond as they take over?

When one cohort leaves power and a new one comes in, the world changes.

Now, the age cohort labels used here come from the seminal work of William Strauss and Neil Howe, *GENERATIONS*. In a series of books, Strauss and Howe have persuasively demonstrated that there have been four successive "generations" of Americans who have cycled through American history from colonial times to the present (and, they forecast, on through the 21st Century, into the futures).

This is where Strauss and Howe differ from other age-cohort specialists. They believe they have found a pattern of succession that in some way allows one to "predict" the future on the basis of the kinds of cohorts who will be in power in specific years to come. So, according to them, not only does "the world change" when one cohort leaves power and a new one comes in, but they believe it is now possible to say, in at least broad terms, *HOW* the world will change. If their theory and method is valid, this is a major contribution indeed. Let's assume it is valid now and see what they have to say about the futures.

Strauss and Howe have used various terms to identify these generations generically. I still prefer the labels they used in their first book, *GENERATIONS*. There, the four cohort-types found in the past and expected in the future in the US are:

- Idealists
- Reactives
- Civics
- Adaptives

Then the cycle begins again with new Idealists, then, new Reactives, and so on.

As the name implies, the Idealists have some new vision of the future that they strive to articulate, but are not able to achieve in their lifetime.

The next generation, Reactives, reject the Idealists dream, and harken back to some earlier ideal as their vision of the future.

The Civics accept the Idealists vision as given, and do their best to see that it becomes reality; they see the world through the lens of the ideal, and actualize it.

But the vision is spent and weak by the time the next generation comes long, and yet there is no viable alternative yet. So these Adaptives simply do the best they can with the old ideal, but are pretty cynical about anything new or better for the future.

Until a new generation of new Idealists comes along with a new ideal...and so on forever through American history and futures, say Strauss and Howe.

It is important to understand how these types map to specific generations of Americans.

Here is the way it looks from the Second World War to the immediate future according to Strauss and Howe:

Civics	G. I.s	1901
Adaptives	Silents	1925
Idealists	Boomers	1943
Reactives	Gen Xers	1960
Civics	Millennials	1982
Adaptives	Cybers	2004
Idealists	??	2020?
Reactives	??	2040?

Strauss and Howe argue, in later books (and on their website) that this general typology seems to work worldwide, and often (but not always) in general sync with the American cycles. That is, they believe this is a global phenomenon, and not just an American one, though there are important differences between countries and cultures.

And of course, as with any sociological theory, this describes aggregate group behavior and beliefs. As we have already seen, there will be many individuals who will differ from others of their cohort. And the theory works best in describing the middle of each cohort, and not the beginning and end of the cohort cycle.

Still, it is well worth considering when anticipating things to come.