

Book Review of *The Generation Myth* by Bobby Duffy

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Abstract

The Generation Myth by Bobby Duffy, Basic Books, 2021, ISBN 9781541620308, 288 pages.

Bobby Duffy wrote *The Generation Myth* as a contribution to the topic of the similarities and differences among the different generational groups. The aim of this review was to direct attention to Duffy's clear-headed framework, which cuts through the doom and gloom analyses of amplified generational differences and the associated threat of a looming generational war. The review points to the extensive research, rational assessments, and refreshing insights on the topic that the author packs into 288 pages. The book's contents are relevant to researchers, pundits, and the merely curious on the cross-cutting topic. It is conveniently available in several print and audio versions, making it easy to access, read, and reference.

Introduction

The Generation Myth gives an initial first impression of being another effort to pontificate on the popular topic of generational differences. With the airwaves and bookstore aisles already saturated with the opinions of pundits in politics, religion, education, business, and other disciplines on the topic, the release of another book about the generations seemed a stretch. Published by Basic Books in 2021, *The Generation Myth* was written to elevate the discussion on every topic that pundits have a penchant for lacing with their views on generational ideologies and differences, and the book does not disappoint. The author, Bobby Duffy, is a leading social researcher in the UK. He is also a professor of public policy and director of the Policy Institute at King's College London whose profile lends sufficient credibility to spark the curiosity of anyone interested in the topic of generational differences.

Review

Duffy began his book with an acknowledgment of the complexities and controversies of generational groupings. Throughout the book, he explored the efforts of several researchers who have proffered coherent explanations of how best to make sense of the features and roles of each generational category. In each chapter, Duffy provided ample references of varied applications of these explanations. He acknowledged that generational thinking is a powerful lens with which to make sense of environmental changes and challenges.

Through his extensive research, the pages yield a litany of all the familiar descriptors of each different generations and the thinkers who responded to moral panics about fads and trends with generation-based prescriptions and predictions. The resulting compendium of the work of thought leaders on the topic alone is a robust return on the investment of the cost of buying the book and the time spent to read or listen to it.

In the introduction, Duffy anchored his assessment in the dichotomous categorization of “the young and old” (p. 2). He shared witty anecdotes about the different generations that have dominated news and online discussions. Duffy referred to these conversational refrains as “the endlessly repeated story” and asks the poignant question: “But is any of it true?” (p. 1). This overarching question is what led the author on his quest for the answers he distilled in 11 chapters and 288 pages. In every chapter, including the introduction, Duffy showed his knowledge of prevailing myths and meticulously dispelled each with scientific proof. Cutting through the breathless oscillations that dominate the airwaves in wild swings from boom to doom to gloom, *The Generation Myth* is, partly, a compilation of how every new generation has been contrasted sharply with their predecessors and defined through the narrow lens of their reactions to the realities of their time. Inherently, the attempts to define and describe groups of people as a generational cohort is a cycle that is certain to persist but doomed to uncertain explanations that can’t stand the test of time or justly encompass the complexities of the subject. Ultimately, Duffy argued, there are only three explanations of how all attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors evolve. These are “period, life cycle, and cohort effects” (p. 7).

Period effects mean that the attitude, beliefs, and behaviors of everyone, regardless of age, will change consistently because of a major event. Two cases in point are the terrorist attack of September 11 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Life cycle effects influence changes related to age and life stage such as graduation, marriage, and retirement. Cohort effects explain how the attitude, beliefs, and behaviors of people within the same generation can differ because they were socialized differently. Duffy argued that this tripartite framework, alone or in combination, is a far more reliable guide to understanding and predicting why people of different age groups think and act as observed.

Throughout the rest of the book, the author leads an intricate exploration of how these three factors are the rational lens with which to attempt to understand societal change rather than the trope of when people were born. Depending on which group he focused on, he moved deftly from the bland “the young and old” (p. 2) in his introduction to the familiar monikers of whichever age group he addressed.

From his corner of the world, Duffy takes his reader on a scan of the western world using his framework to analyze many familiar instances of societal change. In contrast to the fast-paced onslaught of unrelenting societal change, the cadence of his exploration is comfortable, his insights are eye-opening, and his conclusions are rational and fact-based.

The Generation Myth did not share much about non-Western cultures. However, the author’s provision of a framework rather than a set of prescriptions makes this book a respectful and welcome contribution to scholarly discussions on the topic of generational differences in any cultural context. Hence, it is highly probable that in the future, there will be copious references to its pages in several peer-reviewed articles on the topic. In the interim, Bobby Duffy has earned appreciation for calming the storm of opinions that a generational war looms. Readers will turn the last page of his book with the assurance that people of different ages, people going through different stages, people who are socialized differently, and people who experience different things may exhibit different attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors at different times. That generational differences are normal, understandable, and, rightly understood, is neither an indication nor a forecast of a generational war.



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