

Raising the Bar Sydney 2018

Steven Hitchcock – Generation why

Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2018 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast you'll hear Stephen Hitchcock's talk, Generation Why. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

Thank you, everyone. Thank you very much for coming out to see me tonight. To be honest, it's a little bit surreal that anyone is real interested in hearing what I have to say beyond my students, some of whom are here this evening. So, thank you for that.

You know, what I want to start off by talking tonight is a very simple premise. The fact that generations, and generational categories, they're popular. They are out there. They exist. We know about them. They kind of makes sense to us. And, I think that many people out there talk about them. They engage with them. They write books on them. They write organisational seminars on managing millennials, you know. All of these things kind of exist and they are out there.

And I think where I want to start is to say that they exist and they're out there, but believe it or not, we can't actually empirically prove they exist. We can't prove that they're real. There's no scientific evidence that says, oh, by the way, you know, actually we proved that millennials are a real thing. Now, what do I mean by that?

As scientists, and, yes, even if I'm a social scientist, I'm still kind of a scientist, right? As scientists we love to be able to do things where we maybe can put them in a lab and we can remove some variables and we can find some distinct categories. But, when it comes to generations we actually can't do that. We actually can't figure out where they start and where they stop and what they mean and what – we can't even explain why they even should exist. And it's kind of a really interesting thing, right? And I think something that I'm going to talk a lot about tonight is that what this doesn't align with is this popular perception that they do exist, and this is quite confusing, and this is quite contradictory and many of you are probably going to think I'm an absolute crazy person, but that's okay. I'm going to talk tonight with, and I'm going to speak to a few points, many of the points that I make many of you are going to think I'm a crazy person, and that's okay.

I'd like you to just suspend your disbelief for about 30 minutes. When it comes to question time all that disbelief can come back. I'm absolutely okay with it. But, just suspend your disbelief for about 30 minutes. I'm going to start with a very facetious and intentionally inflammatory statement. I have so, for many years, argued that generational categories have become something of the modern horoscope, the modern zodiac, right? That the time in which we are born we are ascribed with our identity – such as millennial or Aquarius, and somehow we can open up the Sydney Morning Herald and we can look at our horoscope for being an Aquarius. And, incidentally, there'll be an article on how to manage millennials, right? It's quite – it's quite lovely. I'm sorry if there are any Sydney Morning Herald journalists here tonight. I love you, really.

But, the point here is the fact that for many of us we act as if they are real and as if they have a very real impact in somehow defining our lives and who we are, but it isn't something that we can necessarily show. But, where it gets even weirder is that they kind of just makes sense to us, regardless of whether they exist, regardless of whether people can prove they exist or not, we look out there and they kind of just make sense. They are kind of intuitive.

They kind of look and feel like things that seem like reasonable statements. Yeah, I mean, I guess if you are born in the '90s and you grew up with Pokemon, then I guess you feel a certain way about – something like that, right? Like, there's kind of a lesson there. And, yes, again, I'm being a little bit facetious. But, you know, I think we see arguments around things like digital natives and whatnot and it kind of does make sense. But, hand up if you like the idea of being put in a generational box? I'll put my hand down because I'm no. Two people. All right. So, the vast majority of people would generally say no. So, what on Earth is going on? We can't prove they exist. People don't like them very much. The research actually shows that there doesn't seem to be a great deal of correlation between what we predict and what happens. So, what the hell is going on? My speech this evening, the intent is to try and offer you a rationale as to why they exist as ideas, and why we like them as categories. And, by the end of it, hopefully you'll get some kind of understanding as to why these things are out there and why they're important, and I'm going to offer you three tonight. The first is historical. I'm a big history buff. I loved history. When I was in year 12 I took four of my five subjects were history, the other one was English. I love history. So, the first one is historical. The second one is practical, a very practical reason as to why we like generational categories. And, the third one, because I can't help myself, is going to be a little bit theoretical and a little bit philosophical, okay? So, those are going to be the three things I'm going to put out there tonight. And really my goal tonight, when you walk out of here, I hope you feel a little curious, a little interested, and a little less certain about the world than you did 30 minutes beforehand.

So, where to start? Throughout history, and when we take a long look at history, we see a rich and long tradition of older people criticising younger people. And, I'm not even the first person to observe this. There's a gentleman, Friedrich Heer, he was a historian, very interesting guy in my opinion, and he actually wrote – spent his entire career writing about this, talking about these things. And we have these amazing records back from 400 BC, before the time of Alexander the Great, and it is a lovely quote from a politician that, I kid you not, is chiselled into stone. And I'm not going to read out the whole thing, mainly because I don't speak ancient Greek. I'll give you the kind of modern version of it. But, the politician was complaining. He complained about young people. He said, young people don't seem very interested in school. They don't seem very interested in politics. They don't seem interested in the rules. All they seem to care about is eating out and dancing and sexual promiscuity.

Okay, if that sounds familiar, it's because we continue to make the same criticisms of youth over and over and over. 400 BC that was written. And that politician, in ancient Greece, was not the last to make those criticisms. He just happens to be the first that we have actual evidence of doing so. I would hazard a guess that it's been happening a little bit longer than that. And I think, as we move forward, we see a continuing tradition in western history, and I'm only speaking to western history because it's the one I'm most familiar with, but we see a continuing history in western history where young people seem to be the problem, where young people are the ones pushing for change and saying, hey, I'm not very happy with the world. I think we should do this a little bit differently. I'll give you a really good example of this. Youth was first defined in the encyclopaedia in the late 1960's. Doesn't it seem bizarre to you? Youth appeared in an encyclopaedia for the first time 40, 50 years ago? That doesn't make sense. I mean, whether you believe in creation, you believe we've been on this planet for five, 7000 years, or you believe in evolution and you think we've been here for few hundred thousand more than that, it doesn't really matter. In either case, it seems kind of ludicrous that we only really defined youth as a concept 40 or 50 years ago. Why is that? Well, there's a number of interesting perspectives. The first is that we only seem to define youth in history when they begin acting in problematic ways. People seem very uninterested in youth until they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing. Any parents in the room can probably relate to this. Your children are probably very nice until they don't do what they're told, right? But, even then, we can look even further throughout history and we can see this. If

anyone is familiar with things like the renaissance, the French Revolution. There were comments and concerns made at the same time about young people. Why do they see problems with these things? Why are they issues with society? You know, why do they need to be out there? And, I think it's very, very curious, again and again we see these criticisms. You know, when we lived in a time where we saw, well, we didn't, but many people did, when we look in the 1950's we had the American civil rights movement, and it was – it was clearly defined by young people who were completely impassioned and driven about this cause and wanted to see the world change.

1960's, we see a huge sexual revolution that, again, took place in the United States, and it seemed to be young people and university students who were doing these things. The 1970's we had, of course, the protests surrounding the Vietnam War. 1980's, a little bit closer to home, I was born just in the 1980's. But, 1980's we had, and we saw more locally what has become very famous in my home country of New Zealand, as the South African Rugby Tour, where we had young people storming onto rugby pitches to protest a country and a team that was supporting apartheid, right? And I think the point that I want to make here is, throughout history young people have been a problem. They have been a problem to be solved. And I think that, to me, this is kind of a fascinating point. Because, has anyone ever thought maybe there's nothing special or unique about millennials at all? Maybe we are the next greatest revolution – you know, generation. Maybe we don't have any real interest in work life balance. Maybe we're just doing and saying what young people always have, right? And kind of here's my point, if your parents aren't here tonight, or your grandparents aren't here tonight, go and talk to them and say, hey, when you were 20 years old how did you feel about spending the next 40, 50 years of your life working nine to five every day, right? I don't think there's anyone jumping out of high school or uni [phonetic] saying, oh man, golly I'm excited about grinding out 55 hours a week for \$56,000 a year. I have some of my students in the room tonight, that's what you've got to look forward to in Sydney.

But, I think that this is my point. Youth have always been defined by society as a problem. And, this is my first alternative explanation. There's nothing unique or special about millennials or Gen X or baby boomers or Gen Z. But, what is kind of unsurprising is, we do live in a society where every time a new generation pops up, so do the same criticisms. They don't seem that interested in work life balance. Oh, sorry, they do seem interested in work life balance. They don't seem to buy into the corporate culture. Why are they having so much sex? Why is this person dressed this way in this music video, right? All of these things get said time and time again. And, do you know what the most terrifying part of this is historically, that if you're in the room in your 20's, in about 10 or 15 years you're going to start saying the same things about young people, right? I mean, historically that's kind of what we've seen. And, so, that's kind of my first explanation as to why we like generational categories. It's not that we like generational categories, we kind of just like complaining about young people because they're different, right? So, that's the first. The second explanation I'm going to offer, which is a little bit practical but, again, I'm sneaking in that academic stuff. The second explanation is a process that we like to call sense making.

You may have heard about sense making before. Sense making was coined by a gentleman called Karl Weick, and he had a simple idea, and it's this. We all like to think ourselves as very intelligent, very smart, we're scientists, right? We are the masters of rational thought. We can look out in the world and we can assess the situation and we can come up with clear conclusions as to why and how things happened. Karl Weick had a slightly different take on the situation. He said that we aren't scientists interested in causes and effects, we're people looking for explanations. And, more than that, we're people looking for explanations that we like. And this is where it gets quite interesting. One of the things that we can find is that when people run into a challenging situation, or something they don't understand, maybe they get into trouble. What people will do more often than not is they will look for explanations that

align with what they already believe. Now, many of you probably have done this in the past. Has anyone made a pretty terrible mistake, but it's kind of worked out fine in the end? [Inaudible] worked out fine in the end. It's like, no, no, hold on. You still made a terrible mistake and you had really bad reasons in doing it. You were just saying that because it makes you feel good. It makes sense with your worldview. And this is a simple premise of sense making, that we don't actually look for the truth, we don't look for causes and effects, we look for explanations that make sense to us. And it gets even a little bit more complicated than that. We prefer explanations that confirm what we already believe.

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And there's really – this has been shown time and time again. People much prefer explanation that simply aligns and confirms their existing worldview. Now, many of you can probably think about instances of this. And, you know, I'm not going to put you on the spot and ask anyone to come up with a time, but if anyone has ever said, well, we're doing it this way because it's the way we've always done it, right?

That's kind of really good example of sense making. There's no real logical rationale behind it other than the fact that you're already invested in the way that we've been doing it so; therefore, the way we've been doing it is correct, right? And it's kind of this really intricate and really complex social process, and there's a really good reason for it, and it's kind of a matter of survival, really, because if every time we encountered a problem, and something happened we didn't like, we would have to call into question ourselves, right? Can you imagine, can you imagine what a day would be like when you wake up and you say, there's no milk. Well, I forgot to buy some. That's on me, right? Or, you go down to catch the bus and the bus goes past you. And you say, well, if I left early for work. That's on me. A car goes passed and splashes you, like it seems to have done for the last three weeks of my life, oh well, that's on me. I should have driven to work today, I guess, right? But, over and over and over people do not want everything to be their fault, right? People want to be able to go through their day without questioning their very own reality and their very own existence.

Now, where it gets even a little bit more complicated than that, is that we like realities that comply with our identity. We like to make sense in a way that aligns with our existing worldview and how we see ourselves. Before me, Dimitria Groutsis was giving an amazing talk regarding gender and work and diversity and the challenges that a lot of women and people from non-Anglo backgrounds face trying to work in the modern world. Now, one of the comments she made was about – oh, sorry, one of the comments she didn't make, sorry, one of the people asked about Pauline Hanson you know, seen in the media this week and her comments about, oh, well, it's okay to be white.

Now, I think part of the reason why people find the conversation so stressful and anxiety-filled and they worry they can't get into it, is because people are worried that maybe they'll have done something wrong, that something is their fault with them then. And, so, we see sense making as a process that people go on in all aspects of their lives, and I think that's an important one to understand that we enact. Something that I found in my research, which is very interesting, is that people don't believe they are an embodiment of a generation. If I say to people, what does the word generation mean to you? They say something along the lines of, well, I mean, I know that I'm a Gen Y, but like I don't really associate with it or anything. I don't really put much stock into it. That's a pretty typical response, and many of you in the room are probably the same. Like, you probably know what generation or category you're in, but many of you may not necessarily put a great deal of stock in saying I am this or I am that, whatever.

Another interesting thing that I found in our data is that many people actually see generational categories as quite negative, and they see them as something that certainly doesn't help them in the workplace, whether they are good or whether they are bad. And it's a really interesting perspective, because a lot of people try to make sense of them as kind of just this weird media criticism that's made about their generation. Another really interesting finding in my research, is that no matter who I talk to, no matter what age they are, they always, unfailingly, regardless of these long conversations we've had about generations, often start criticising the people who are younger than they are, right? So, I did, for my dissertation, for my Ph.D. research, I did this study where I went and spoke to young people about generations. And I spoke to really young people intentionally, because their voices aren't that apparent in the media. And I said to them, hey, you know, 23, what's it like? And a lot of them say, oh, you know, I'm over it. This is a young man's game now, right? Twenty-three, 25 years old and you got people saying, oh, I think I might need to head off, you know. Don't know if I've got what it takes anymore. Yeah, I'm kind of a [audio skip] figure around here. I'm a bit of a – I'm a bit of a - you know, do you know what it's like to have a 23-year-old calling themselves an old soul, saying they're a bit motherly, and they sort of take care of people when they come in?

But, what this made very clear to me in my research, is that people see young and old as different, and they see them as different, and they make sense of themselves along the lines of these differences. You know, when I've gone, and I work a lot in media communications, advertising, and marketing type industries, and often what I see is I'll walk in and I'll do an interview and I'll speak with someone and they'll be like, oh, yeah, I mean, I just, I don't know what the kids – I said, what's up with that Snapchat, you know? What do you mean the picture gets deleted, you know? People make sense of these differences via the technologies and things that they use. And often what you get is, you get people kind of enacting generational differences and creating the same problems that they say that they dislike. So, those are two reasons so far. There's a historical reason why we engage in generational critique, and there's kind of a practical one. The historical one is it's something that older people have always done, and the practical one is it's kind of an important thing for us to do to get through our days.

We can kind of explain away differences by what seems normal and right to us. The third part, and this is where I'm going to get a bit weird with it and get a little bit of philosophy and history into it, is the last thing I want to talk about is identity and identification. All of us have an idea about who we are and who we would like to be, right? It's a pretty simple premise. What I would like you to do for a moment is imagine that all of the identities in the world are floating up above us in the sky, all right? Be it you're an Australian, you're maybe an immigrant, you're a man, you're a woman, you're a sports player, you're a craft brewer, you're a hipster, you're a social media guru, whatever, no matter how big, no matter how small. All of the idea – you're a student, you're a mother, you're a father, all of these identities are floating about in the sky. And the theory here, when it comes to identity, is that every day you and I are doing things to connect ourselves with those different identities. And, quite simply, it's a process of what we call identification. Simple example. Let's say that you're a mother, and you see your identity as being a mother, and you want to enact that identity of being a mother. So, what do you do? You talk about your kids. You show people pictures of your kids. You talk about motherhood. You read mummy blogs, right? Similarly, let's say that you're a bit of a geek, right? You look around your work and you say, oh, I'm a bit of a geek, right?

So, you wear socks that have got Super Mario on them, right? You're trying to say something about yourself. You are trying to connect with that identity target. And, it doesn't need to be intentional and it's not unintentional, and it's not good, it's not bad, it's just kind of what we do. Every day you and I make decisions about who we are, and we do things to enact those

identities. The way that we dress is a simple example, right? You might say [audio skip] my work clothes, I don't think about it that much. Yeah, but you bought your work clothes because they say something of yourself, right? I wear nice grey jacket because it covers up my insecurity about being a 30-year-old lecturer, right? I wear purple shoes, though, because I still want to be kind of fun with it, right? I wear brown shoes, not black shoes, today because I didn't want to take it too seriously, but still like a little bit seriously, you know. We do this in a lot of things we do. In the way that we talk and the car that we drive. I mean, yeah, sure, you look at the sticker on window to say it's mileage, but you're like this is a bit – this is a bit manly man, man for me. You know, it's a bit – I don't know if I'm a Toyota Hilux kind of guy, right?

We do things all day, every day, that connect us with identity targets. And it can be big things like buying a car, or it can be little things. Maybe when your boss says, hey, can anyone stay behind tonight, I need some help setting up this project? And you want to identify with being a good worker, with someone who's keen to do well, someone who is supportive, someone who is helpful. And you say, hey, I'll do that. And you say replied first on the e-mail chain, well done me, making sure to hit reply all so everyone knows you're the most enthusiastic, right? So, the theory goes, is that we act in ways every day that connect us with certain identity targets. Now, when it comes to work and when it comes to life, there are very few ways that people necessarily want to, or feel comfortable or feel like they should, identify with. One of the ways that is incredibly prominent is, I'm old, I'm young, I'm a baby boomer, I'm a millennial, I'm a Gen X. Oh, I'm a baby boomer. I don't know anything about how to fix that printer. I don't know how – I don't know how to fix a printer, all right. I've got as much experience as a printer technician as you do, right? It says it needs a new cartridge. I don't know, put a new cartridge in, right? The point here is that the reason why people talk about, and one of the reasons why people love to talk about news generational categories, is they form a foundation of identity for us. They give us something to connect with. Now, what I would like to draw your attention to, and again, I'm going to make my allusion back to the horoscope and, yes, I'm going to beat this metaphor to death, is the fact that every generational category, just like every zodiac sign, is kind of hard to object to. They all tell you something good about yourself. They say, well, yeah, I'm a hard worker. Yeah, I care about work life balance. Yeah, I'm quite innovative, right? Or, they tell you, you're a caring person. You can be emotional at times, right? Like, every generational category gives you something to work with, is kind of the point here. Now, part of the reason why is because they are so salient in the workplace.

Not a day goes by where, again, you don't flick open the Sydney Morning Herald, or you turn on the news. In fact, I saw a – I saw an article this morning about how millennials are killing Australia's housing industry. They're killing the industry. They can't even buy houses, how are they killing it, right? And, so, what happens is you go into work and someone says, oh, you know, oh, you know, I'm going to – I'm living with my parents. Someone says, oh, you damn millennials, you've got to move out of home and grow up. It's like I literally cannot afford to pay for rent, right? Do you know how much a mortgage costs? And I think that where the problems start to creep in, is whether or not these categories are real, whether or not they can be proven in a lab, it doesn't matter, because people act and talk as if they do, and their talk has a very real impact on our lives.

Ten years ago, almost to the day, I started my first job. I started a job working at an advertising agency. And, one of the first things I got asked to do was, figure out where we should be advertising on the internet for one of our big clients. Now, Facebook had just actually gone public at this point, not public in terms of an IPO, but public in terms of anyone could sign up. And I saw my friends signing up and I saw people, companies, pages. And I remember, I made this PowerPoint and I was so excited about it and I went into this big meeting and I had been made in charge of this and I said, I think our client should have a Facebook page where they can ask – where people can ask questions. And I got laughed at, right? And I got told that was a stupid idea. No one would do this. People are always going

to prefer the phone. And then it started. It's not his fault, he's a Gen Y. His life is on the internet. And it didn't matter so much at the time, but it kind of turned into a running joke. And what happened is every week we showed up and someone said, oh, what's going on on the internet, Stephen? And about two or three months later my boss sent me down and he said, look, I'm really sorry, but we're going to have to move you from the client. We're going to have to move you from this case, because they just don't see you as mature enough, right? You just – all you seem to talk about is the internet.

And my response was, but that's all anyone asks me about, right? You don't need to feel sorry for me. It turned out okay in the end. But, my point is that while the generational categories may be made up, and while the reasons may not be good, they are real, and they have a very real impact on ourselves and on our lives. And the point here is that look, yeah, sure, we can't prove they exist. We also can't prove they don't exist. And, I am not up here today to argue that generational categories don't exist, because we just don't have the data for it. But, what I am up here to say today is that the way we talk about age and the way we talk about generations has a very real impact on people's lives, young and old.

We live in a world today where the young people feel like they aren't taken seriously, like they can't talk about the things they're interested in, like they can't talk about videogames because people will think they're kids. We live in a world where older people feel like the young people are coming for them and they've got to figure out these things and they see these technologies as something they don't understand. And, again, these are cycles and patterns that we see over and over again. But, we know that practically these impacts are real. And I'd like to go back to my metaphor of the fact of the zodiac, and of the modern zodiac, and I really do think that in many ways we do look to the modern zodiac, and we look to these generational categories to help us figure out the future, to tell us how to manage young people tomorrow. But, and forgive me this indulgence, I just very rarely get the opportunity to quote Shakespeare, the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, right? The problem is not the young people.

The problem is not the millennials or Gen Z or the Snapchat they use. The problem is that we have a hard time taking young people seriously and seeing them as complete adults with real opinions and they're valuable. Sure, they might be young. Sure, they might not know the rules yet, but they've got something to add and we need to see it that way. And I truly believe that if we live in a world where people look at young people in organisations and in life and they respect what they have to say as a valuable member of the organisation with something to add, it can be absolutely more exciting and more interesting tomorrow. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

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