

Grup vs. Man-Child: Two Responses to the Psychosocial Crisis of Early Adulthood

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In one of our earlier classes the monologue of Jacques from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* was quoted in which he poetically takes the audience through the seven stages of life. These stages go as follows:

1. Infant
2. School-Boy
3. Lover
4. Soldier
5. Justice
6. Pantaloon
7. Second Childhood

The phenomenon that will be discussed takes place somewhere between the stage of the Soldier and the Justice. It seems that a new persona has been carved out between these two Shakespearean stages, while looking nothing like the stage on either side of it. There is a tendency in modern young adulthood for people to go to great lengths not to grow up nor act their age. This new stage actually shares many characteristics with both the School-Boy stage and the stage of the Lover and could easily be labeled the Second Childhood. Jacques does mention Second Childhood as being the last stage of life, but the stage of late adulthood might actually be better described as Second Infancy.

In this new Second Childhood the participants respond to getting older by acting younger. This generation does not live in their parent's basement: they are married and have children and jobs but they go out of their way to approach all of these endeavors very differently than their parents did. The men who are experiencing Second Childhood are distinct from the so-called Man-Child who still lives in an apartment with his buddies and who will never consider getting married or having children because this might interrupt his video game play, concert-going or any of the other activities that help him define who he is. The Second Childhood contingent are not willing to give these activities up either, the only difference is they do them with their children. If anything the children give them a legitimate excuse to do things like buy a new gaming system and then, in the children, they find in-house gaming partners.

Regarding the Man-Child, there are several theories about his origins:

The most prevalent theory comes from feminist-influenced academics and cultural critics, who view dude media as symptoms of backlash, a masculinity crisis. Men feel threatened by female empowerment, these thinkers argue, and in their anxiety, they cling to outdated roles (Hymowitz, 2008, p. 2).

In the book *Personality* (1998), author Cary Cooper talks about young adulthood in accordance with Erikson's psychosocial crisis: Intimacy vs. Isolation. Cooper argues that young adults may subconsciously resist intimacy because it presents too great a risk to their sense of self-worth:

It is only as young people emerge from their identity struggles that their egos can master the sixth stage, that of intimacy. [. . .] The avoidance of such experiences because of a fear of ego loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption (Cooper, 1998, p. 74).

The Man-Child does not seem to be isolated as he is constantly hanging out with his friends and going to clubs to meet girls - but there is no true intimacy, as Cooper defines it, in these relationships. While the Man-Child may be surrounded by people, he will remain emotionally isolated as long as he protects his ego from whatever risk he perceives that intimacy may pose. Hymowitz (2008) points to the Man-Child's tendency to avoid deep attachments, not just marriage, as his deepest existential problem.

Another possible explanation for the phenomenon of the Man-Child has to do with the negative effects of divorce on children. Given the high statistical probability that their parents were divorced, the Man-Child has likely seen his father go through a mid-life crisis, leave his mother, take an apartment and begin pursuing all of the things that he enjoyed doing before the wife and family came along. Knowing first-hand the pain that divorce causes, these young adults have chosen to circumvent the whole marriage/divorce cycle and have gone straight into their father's post-divorce state. This post-divorce state coincidentally looks very similar to the mid-life crisis. The Man-Child is therefore showing all of the signs of mid-life crisis despite having only reached the quarter-life mark. Being the child of parents who have divorced could easily explain a resistance to deep interpersonal attachments. This resistance shows in the latest statistics. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) reports that an estimated 30.5 million people live alone. This number comprises 27 percent of all U.S. households and this number is up from 17 percent in 1970.

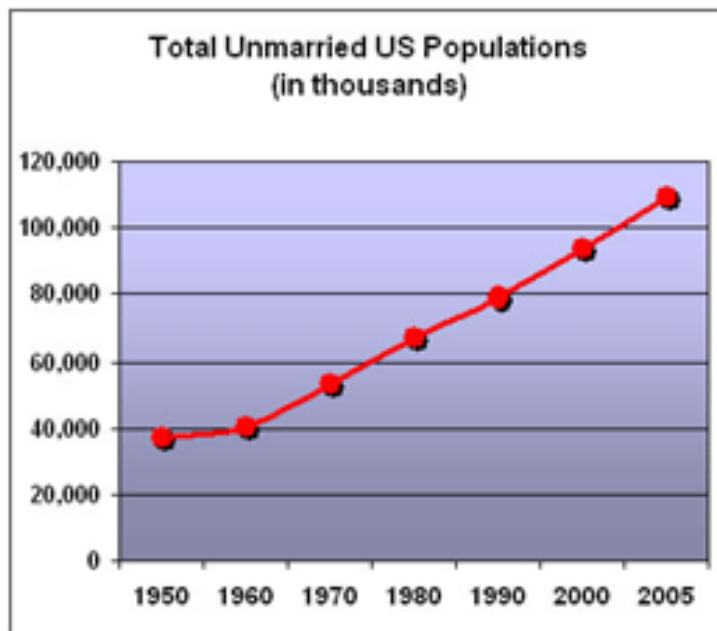


Figure 1: This chart shows the increase in the number of unmarried adults in the U.S. since 1950.

Note: from "America's Families and Living Arrangements", 2008, U.S. Census Bureau

Understanding the Man-Child is important for understanding his Second Childhood contemporaries. Author, Adam Sternbergh (2006) has written what may be the manifesto of this Second Childhood set. Sternbergh coins the phrase Grups, a contraction of "Grown-Ups". This term is based on an obscure Star Trek episode where Captain Kirk and the team find themselves on a planet populated entirely by children. Sternbergh's parallel is based on the way this demographic disregards the age gap, essentially making everyone a kid. Sternbergh proceeds to define this segment of the population in the following way:

This cohort is not interested in putting away childish things. They are a generation or two of affluent, urban adults who are now happily sailing through their thirties and forties, and even *fifties*, clad in beat-up sneakers and cashmere hoodies, content that they can enjoy all the good parts of being a grown-up (a real paycheck, a family, the warm touch of cashmere) with none of the bad parts (Dockers, management seminars, indentured servitude at the local Gymboree). It's about a brave new world whose citizens are radically rethinking what it means to be a grown-up and whether being a grown-up still requires, you know, actually growing up (Sternbergh, 2006, p. 2).

This article spoke to me personally and upon reading it I began to feel incredibly transparent. Apparently I am not the only parent who chose to raise my children mainly on *Tintin Comics* instead of the more traditional *Pat the Bunny* books (Kunhardt, 1968). I also have two close friends, both of them young fathers, who have ended up in ankle braces after getting injured on their skateboards. These grown men decided they wanted to get out their old skateboards just like when they were 12. One of them told me he was practicing for when his son is old enough to ride a skateboard, I pointed out to him that by that time he will be in his forties, a point which seemed to be completely lost on him.

It does seem that the Grup (at least the male Grup, who I will be referring to mostly in this paper) and the Man-Child do have in common the pursuit of activities they enjoyed as children. Both of these groups not only enjoy doing things they did as children, they also enjoy the activities of kids today. They listen to the same music, play the same video games, and go to the same movies, etc. I am a good example of this. When the stop-motion animation feature *Coraline* came out I was accused of being more excited than my five year old to go and see it. In fact, *Coraline* has become a regular figure in the bedtime stories I tell. So while these divergent groups may have many things in common, the one thing they do not have in common is their comfort level with commitment.

In the theory of the origins of the Man-Child, divorce figures largely as a causal factor. The members of both groups have been described as a generation of men raised by women, meaning the father was not in their lives due to divorce or other factors. Both of these groups are determined not to make the same mistakes their fathers did. This can be seen as a rejection of the way their parents approached life. This generation is not satisfied with the lives that their parents chose for themselves, working at jobs they do not enjoy, spending retirement on the golf course and other stereotypical behavior shared by many in their parents' generation. The Grups set themselves apart by joining with their children in their everyday pursuits. The Man-Child seeks to avoid his parents' mistakes by simply never becoming one. If the father of these two

groups abandoned them, then went out and bought a sports car: the Man-Child responds by buying the sports car without ever having to worry about the wife and family, the Grup responds by racing a sports car in the video game Grand Theft Auto with his child. Both of these seem to be significant improvements over the example that was set for them.

Piaget discusses the theory of epigenesis, which states that every person goes through stages of cognitive development that builds on each of the previous stages (Seifert, 1999). If this is so, then is this generation stunting its own developmental growth by not growing up in the traditional way? Or is this generation just growing up in a different way with different priorities? If the Psychosocial Crisis of this stage, as put forward by Erikson, is Intimacy vs. Isolation then is this generation properly addressing these issues (Newman, 2009, p. 406)? This sixth stage in Erikson's theory of development involves the young adult cultivating lasting friendships and relationships. If the ability to have relationships is not formed, for whatever reason, there is an increased risk for this not happening later in life. From the approach of cultivating relationships, it would seem that the Grup definitely has the developmental advantage. The Man-Child may not be running out on his family but he is also not investing anything emotionally into his relationships and for this reason he will not receive the emotional pay off that comes from strong and genuine trust. These lasting relationships are the most unappealing to the Man-Child because they require him to hazard the most risk.

The Grup, on the other hand, does not seem to be afraid of the commitments of marriage or fatherhood. Or rather, he responds to the enormous responsibility of having children by throwing himself head-first into the preparation by doing things like buying onesies (or silk-screening them himself, depending on how crafty he is) for the baby with all of his favorite 80's rock band on it. For the Grup, carrying his baby in a Baby Bjorn or sling is the ultimate social statement and fashion statement. The social statements transfer over into the work life. No self-respecting Grup would ever let work get in the way of spending time with his children. Author Neal Pollack responded to the birth of his son by forming a rock band and then taking it on tour. He then went on to chronicle the whole thing in his book *Alternadad: The True Story of One Family's Struggle to Raise a Cool Kid in America* (2007). In my own career I found myself at a company that suddenly expected me to work 60 to 70 hour weeks while I had a one year old at home. I responded as any Grup worth their salt would and traded that career for my new role as stay/work-at-home-dad. This role, which sadly lasted less than six months, has been my favorite occupational role thus far.

There is some potential risk in the parenting style of the Grup for becoming a dreaded Helicopter Parent, the kind who is always hovering. "Baby boomers have arguably been more involved in their children's educations--and their lives in general--than any preceding generation of parents", says Lydia Lum, who works with these types of parents in her daily role as a Parent Coordinator at a university (Lum, 2006, pp. 40–41). The baby boomers who raised the Grups may have passed on some of these over-parenting traits to their children, although the involvement does seem to have taken on a different focus in the Grup parent. While the baby boomers made sure that they took their children to soccer practice, band practice and the math tutor, the Grups actually go with their kids to rock concerts or guitar lessons -- the involvement is less vicarious and more experiential. Unlike the baby boomers, the Grups are not just trying to make sure their

kids have the experiences they never had, they are making sure that they have all of these experiences with their kids. If the efforts of the baby boomer 'helicopter parents' are categorized as selfless and self-sacrificing, then the efforts of involvement by the Grup could be considered self-gratifying, even selfish.

When visiting my old hometown in West Texas, my wife and I were taken aback by the difference in parenting styles from what we see in our more urban home setting: when the children appeared in the kitchen begging for snacks or tattling on one another for countless injustices, the parents responded simply by saying, "Go play". "Go play" is a very familiar directive to me, it is one that my parents used commonly, especially when they were trying to socialize with other adults. These two words usually meant go outside and find something to do, with your friends or alone - it did not matter - and without adult supervision. It was such a natural thing to hear and do at the time, but it is a much more difficult thing for us to do now. In the book *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* author Richard Louv recalls his own childhood when he would spend hours, some would say idly, climbing fruit trees and wandering deep into the woods behind his home (Louv, 2005, p. 9). Louv points to the media's concentrated coverage of isolated kidnapping cases as scaring parents away from nature. Perhaps the helicopter parent, both Baby Boomer and Grup, senses this nature deficiency in their child's life and attempts to make up for it in other ways, like through increasing involvement. It is quite possible that we are raising a generation who, in their inherent need to rebel, may reinstate the two-word imperative, "Go play" and take on a more laissez-faire approach to parenting than did their parents or grandparents.

If Erikson is correct, then children need something to rebel against. Author Carl Pickhardt talks about the innate importance of rebellion in children and defines rebellion as, "an oppositional process that causes the young person to resist demands and push against restraints imposed by resident authorities in order to gain independence and create more freedom of choice" (Pickhardt, 2007, p. 24). Parents should not listen to the same music their children are listening to, ride the same skateboards or play the same video games. The only problem is: the music is just so good, it has all of the elements that we liked in the music we listened to as teenagers, but it is new and that makes it even more appealing. All of the toys that we loved as children are coming back into style: the Smurfs, Transformers, G.I. Joe, Rainbow Bright and my daughters even have an Atari gaming system. My wife has even overheard women asking at children's furniture stores if they have King Size Star Wars sheets which they are obviously not buying for their children. The feeling of nostalgia mixed with the self-gratifying feeling of doing something with your children - that they also enjoy - makes for an irresistible combination.

Every generation resists copying the way their parents did things to some extent. Rebellion against the past generation's way of doing things is certainly nothing new. Every generation also looks back nostalgically and ends up reviving artifacts of their childhood or adolescence, like when my father dusted off his old Bob Dylan LPs and converted them to CDs. The unique trait of the Grup population lies not in their revival of childhood favorites but in their adoption of the younger generation's favorites. In my work at the University I am constantly mistaken for an undergraduate student. As flattering as that may be, it causes me to wonder what the long-term effects of this invisible age gap might be, in an era where we are dressing like kids that are ten

years our junior. If our children have an evolutionary need to rebel against their parents, what will that rebellion look like? Will the children of Grups go out of their way to be "square"? Will our children aspire to spend their retirement on the golf course instead of the art opening? Will their choice of dress be less like that of the "hipster" and more like that of Jacques' "Pantaloon"? I can just imagine my children foregoing the long lines of the Indie rock concert for the shorter lines at Furr's Cafeteria for the Early Bird Special. I suppose only time will tell what the results of our new style of parenting will be. In the interim I am perfectly content to pass the time with my five year old playing Ms. Pac-Man.

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