

# What's Happened to Youth Attitudes since Woodstock?

By Sharon Warden

Current mythology holds that the schizophrenic Sixties created a unique generation of flower children. Next, the self-seeking Seventies gave the world the "me" generation, while the spendthrift Eighties nurtured the ultra-greedy "me me" generation.<sup>1</sup> Trend data, however, to the disappointment of believers in this generational mythology, simply do not support the notion that youth cohorts from the 60s to the early 90s are distinctly different. Certainly, some change in attitudes has occurred over time, especially in the areas of social/cultural acceptance. However, in spite of great technological advances, on the one hand, and the experiences of Vietnam, Watergate and the economic boom of the 80s, on the other, America's young people show remarkable constancy in many basic beliefs and values.

### Politics

Trend data reveal that what we typically describe as one youth culture actually describes several cultures within a given generation. Political leanings demonstrate this quite clearly. Since 1974, between one and three percent of youth consistently describe themselves as *extremely* liberal. Between two and four percent regularly say they are *extremely* conservative. These are the fringes of the youth culture. Somewhere in between are the vast majority, the third youth culture. What makes one generation of youth different from another is the extent to which members of this middle group consider themselves *somewhat more or less* liberal or *somewhat more or less* conservative. Yet, we hear about the fringes and assume, or are told, that they represent the whole.<sup>2</sup>

We have all read that the youth of the 60s were more politically active and aware than any other generation. Data do not necessarily support this image. College

freshmen survey data show 1960s youth the most likely to say that keeping up with political affairs was important to them. However, freshmen from the 1990s had political interests as well. Between three and five percent more freshman in the 1990s than in 1969 or 1970 said influencing the political structure was one of their major life objectives. Further, contrary to popular misconceptions, higher percentages of 1990s than 1960s freshmen reported actually acting on their objectives by participating in organized demonstrations.<sup>3</sup>

Political party preference reveals differences between the generations, although youth often mirror their parent's attitudes when asked about this. In 1977, a plurality of teens described themselves as independents. By 1982, a plurality were Democrats. In 1985 and 1986 the majority of teens were Republicans. At least a plurality of youth remained loyal to the Republican Party until 1992, when 44% described themselves as independents.<sup>4</sup>

### Goals

The goals and ambitions of American youth *have* changed over the decades. Goals that gradually lost advocates among college freshmen from 1969 to 1993 (referring to the percentage change in those who view the objectives as "essential" or "very important") are: developing a meaningful philosophy of life (down 37 percentage points), becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment (down 14 points), and participating in community action programs (down 4 points). Objectives that have become more important to freshmen are: being well off financially (up 30 points), having administrative responsibility for the work of others (up 17 points), and influencing social values (up 8 points). Over this span, helping others who are in difficulty has remained relatively constant at 60%.<sup>5</sup>

Although the trend data show that interest in financial success has increased substantially, the youth of today have not forgotten the importance of helping others or influencing social values—two characteristics commonly associated much more with the 1960s than the 1990s. Further, in 1991, 58% of high school seniors felt "making a contribution to society" in one's life was extremely or quite important, up from 53% in the mid 1970s and 55% in the mid 1980s (see *Perspective* p. 24). Clearly, American youth have not become wholeheartedly selfish and uninterested in the society around them, as the "me me" myth proposes.

Over the years, teens have increasingly seen college as a means of achieving their goals. As the data on page 21 illustrate, in 1970 about 50% of teens planned to attend college. While that was a remarkable proportion even for those times, by 1992, the percentage had reached the even more impressive level of 86%. Motivations for attending college have also changed somewhat since the 1970s. In 1971, 60% of freshmen felt that going on to college "to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas" was very important, while using their degree to "make more money" was very important to only 50%. Twenty years later, going to college to gain a general education held constant, with 65% listing this reason as very important. At the same time, however, using college as a means to increase earning power was seen as very important by 75% (see *Perspective* p. 22).

### Careers

Some say that avarice motivated 1980s youth. Close analysis reveals that money was more important to 80s youth than to their 1970s counterparts. However, feelings of accomplishment remain a high priority throughout the decades.

When asked if they would continue working if they could live comfortably without a job, three-quarters of 1972 youth said they would continue working, and by 1989, that percentage had risen to 80%.<sup>6</sup>

Analysis of what youth value most about a job—in rank order from 1973 to 1989—reveals that they primarily value important work. Chances for advancement and high income sometimes switch rank order with each other, but they consistently rank second or third place. Security and short hours regularly rank fourth and fifth.

Although throughout the decades youth have seen “doing important work” as the most significant aspect of any career, the desire to make a healthy salary has increased. Reflecting the changing motivations for attending college, the percentage of youth citing high income as the most important aspect of a job nearly doubled between 1973 and 1989. Only 14% of young people said high income was most important to them in 1973. However, by 1976 high income was most important to one-quarter. The level of concern for high income remained over 25% throughout the 1980s. Yet, it is important to note that even during the “greedy” 1980s, a larger percentage of young people believed doing important work was more important than earning a high salary.<sup>7</sup>

### Social/Cultural Change

Although a fair amount of consistency was found in generational views on politics and careers, significant change has occurred among young people since the 1960s regarding a cluster of social and cultural issues. Data on the attitudes of college freshmen show increasingly progressive views on women’s place in society. Results from National Opinion Research Center surveys show that 90s youth are more likely than 70s youth to approve of women working outside the home. They are also more likely to agree that working mothers can still have a warm relationship with their children. Smaller percentages said that the husband should be the primary achiever outside the home.<sup>8</sup> Nearly six out of ten freshmen from the entering class of 1967 agreed that the activities of married women

should be confined to the home and family. In 1973 only three out of ten, and by 1993 only 24% of freshmen agreed with this statement.<sup>9</sup>

Youth attitudes toward sex before marriage fluctuated only slightly over time. In 1974, 45% of freshmen saw nothing wrong with living together before marriage and the same percentage said that sex is OK if people like each other. By 1989, half of all freshmen agreed with these statements.<sup>10</sup> However, by 1993 the percent dipped back to 45% (see *Perspective* p.24). A NORC question asking whether premarital sexual relations are OK reveals that about half of young people consistently said sex is not wrong at all before marriage.<sup>11</sup>

Over the last quarter-century, young people’s attitudes on ethnic diversity have changed substantially. In 1974, 40% said they would vote for a law that allowed housing discrimination. By 1989, only one-quarter would vote for such a law, and three-quarters said they would vote for an open housing law.<sup>12</sup> Freshmen survey data also show major changes regarding integration in the educational system. In 1976, over one-third of freshmen agreed that busing is OK if it helps to achieve racial balance in schools. By 1990, six out of ten freshmen agreed with this position.<sup>13</sup>

A majority of young people do not condone extramarital sex, and their attitude on this became much more conservative over time. In 1973 and again in 1976, 50% said extramarital sex is always wrong. In the 1980s, between 66% and 81% said that extramarital sex is always wrong. Just nine percent said extramarital sex is not wrong at all in 1973, and this eroded to one percent by 1989.<sup>14</sup> Attitudes toward divorce also became more conservative during the 80s. Before 1978, a plurality of young people said that divorces should be easier to get. After 1978, over a plurality consistently said that divorces should be harder to obtain.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, youth attitudes regarding many social/cultural issues have changed over the past four decades, but interestingly, not always in the same direction. While young people have become more liberal regarding

the role of women and the worthiness of ethnic diversity, they have also become more conservative towards activities such as extramarital affairs and divorce.

These changes aside, there is a clear line of consistency across the generations regarding political activity as well as career goals. Political interest and activity has not declined dramatically among youth, as myth-makers would have it. Further, although the desire for a high income has increased significantly, youth in the 1990s, like their earlier counterparts, still hope first and foremost for a career and future filled with important work that will make a worthwhile contribution to society.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Charles Panati, *Panati's Parade Of Fads, Follies, And Manias: The Origins Of Our Most Cherished Obsessions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991) pp. 312-429.

<sup>2</sup> Floris Wood, editor, *An American Profile - Opinions And Behaviors, 1972 - 1989, Derived From The General Social Survey (GSS) Conducted By The National Opinion Research Center (NORC)*, (New York: Gale Research Inc., 1990) p. 465. Note: The NORC youth category is 18-23 year olds.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Dey, Alexander Astin and William Korn, *The American Freshmen: Twenty-Five Year Trends* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 1991) pp. 110-111, 122-123. Alexander Astin, William Korn, Ellyne Riggs, *The American Freshmen: National Norms for Fall 1993* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 1993), p. 24. Note: The freshmen surveys represent college freshmen.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bezilla, editor, *America's Youth In The 1990s* (Princeton: The George H. Gallup International Institute, 1993), p. 126. Note: The Gallup Youth Survey represents 13-17 year olds.

<sup>5</sup> Dey et al, pp. 122-123; see also Astin et al, *The American Freshmen: National Norms for Fall 1993*.

<sup>6</sup> Floris Wood, p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 372-388.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 519, 530, 532.

<sup>9</sup> Dey et al, pp. 124-125. Astin et al, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Bezilla, pp. 124-125.

<sup>11</sup> Wood, p. 601.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 519.

<sup>13</sup> Dey et al, pp. 124-125.

<sup>14</sup> Wood, p. 605.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 608.

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Sharon Warden is Senior Polling Analyst, *The Washington Post*