Tunku Varadarajan in WSJ: Jonathan Haidt on the 'National Crisis' of Gen Z

Warped by social media and a victimhood culture, today's young people will imperil American culture and capitalism, the social psychologist warns.
By Tunku Varadarajan

The phrase "generation gap" became popular in the late 1960s, as baby boomers were coming of age. To hear social psychologist Jonathan Haidt tell it, today's generation gap has widened into a chasm. "We have a whole generation that's doing terribly," he says in an interview at his professorial office, book-lined and hushed, at New York University's Stern School of Business. He calls it a "national crisis."

At 59, Mr. Haidt is a young boomer, and he isn't talking about millennials, some of whom are in their 40s by now. Rather, he has in mind the younger cohort, Generation Z, usually defined as those born between 1997 and 2012. "When you look at Americans born after 1995," Mr. Haidt says, "what you find is that they have extraordinarily high rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicide and fragility." There has "never been a generation this depressed, anxious and fragile."

He attributes this to the combination of social media and a culture that emphasizes victimhood. The latter was the subject of his most recent book, "The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure" (2018), with co-author Greg Lukianoff. Social media is Mr. Haidt's present obsession. He's working on two books that address its harmful impact on American society: "Kids in Space: Why Teen Mental Health Is Collapsing" and "Life After Babel: Adapting to a World We Can No Longer Share."

The former title is a metaphor. Mr. Haidt imagines "literally launching our children into outer space" and letting their bodies grow there: "They would come out deformed and broken. Their limbs wouldn't be right. You can't physically grow up in outer space. Human bodies can't do that." Yet "we basically do that to them socially. We launched them into outer space around the year 2012," he says, "and then we expect that they will grow up normally without having normal human experiences."

Mr. Haidt's research, confirmed by that of others, shows that depression rates started to rise "all of a sudden" around 2013, "especially for teen girls," but "it's only Gen Z, not the older generations." If you'd stopped collecting data in 2011, he says, you'd see little change from previous years. "By 2015 it's an epidemic." (His data are available in an open-source document.)

What happened in 2012, when the oldest Gen-Z babies were in their middle teens? That was the year Facebook acquired Instagram and young people flocked to the latter site. It was also "the beginning of the selfie era." Apple's iPhone 4, released in 2010, had the first front-facing camera, which was much improved in the iPhone 5, introduced two years later. Social media and selfies hit a generation that had led an overprotected childhood, in which the age at which children were allowed outside on their own by parents had risen from the norm of previous generations, 7 or 8, to between 10 and 12.

That meant the first social-media generation was one of "weakened kids" who "hadn't practiced the skills of adulthood in a low-stakes environment" with other children. They were deprived of "the normal toughening, the normal strengthening, the normal anti-fragility." Before 2010, teenagers had flip phones. "They'd text each other and say, 'Let's meet down at the mall.' They would do things together." Now, their childhood "is largely just through the phone. They no longer even hang out together." Teenagers even drive less than earlier generations did.

Mr. Haidt especially worries about girls. By 2020 more than 25% of female teenagers had "a major depression." The comparable number for boys was just under 9%. The comparable numbers for millennials at the same age registered at half the Gen-Z rate: about 13% for girls and 5% for boys. "Kids are on their devices all the time," he says, but boys play videogames, often in groups: "Boys thrive if they have a group of boys competing against another group of boys."

Most girls, by contrast, are drawn to "visual platforms," Instagram and TikTok in particular. "Those are about display and performance. You post your perfect life, and then you flip through the photos of other girls who have a more perfect life, and you feel depressed." He calls this phenomenon "compare and despair" and says: "It seems social because you're communicating with people. But it's performative. You don't actually get social relationships. You get weak, fake social links."

Mr. Haidt says he has no antipathy toward the young, and he calls millennials "amazing." Older folks make fun of them, "but that's the normal teasing across generations that you get going back to Plato." To illustrate his point about Gen Z, Mr. Haidt challenges people to name young people today who are "really changing the world, who are doing big things that have an impact beyond their closed ecosystem." He can think of only two, neither of them American: Greta Thunberg, 19, the Swedish climate militant, and Malala Yousafzai, 25, the Pakistani advocate for female education. By contrast, he says millennials remade the "entire world"—though not necessarily for the better. Mark Zuckerberg, born in 1984, founded Facebook when he was 20.

He concedes that his judgment of Gen Z may be premature: "It could be that you'll see some impact in three or four years, by the time they're 30. But I'm predicting that they will be less effective, less impactful, than previous generations." Why? "You should always keep your eye on whether people are in 'discover mode' or 'defend mode.' " In the former mode, you seize opportunities to be creative. In the latter, "you're not creative, you're not future-thinking, you're focused on threats in the present."

University students who matriculated starting in 2014 or so have arrived on campus in defend mode: "Here they are in the safest, most welcoming, most inclusive, most antiracist places on the planet, but many of them were acting like they were entering some sort of dystopian, threatening, immoral world." Once they enter the workplace, they're less innovative, less inclined to take risks, and that may "undermine American capitalism," Mr. Haidt says.

He points to the work of the Manhattan Institute's Zach Goldberg, who extrapolated from Pew Research Institute data and found that 56% of women 18 to 29 responded affirmatively to the question: Has a doctor or other healthcare provider ever told you that you have a mental health condition? "Some of that," Mr. Haidt says, "has to be just self-presentational," meaning imagined. "This is exactly part of the problem. This new ideology . . . valorizes victimhood. And if your sub-community motivates you to say you have an anxiety disorder, how is this going to affect you for the rest of your life?" He answers his own question: "You're not going to take chances, you're going to ask for accommodations, you're going to play it safe, you're not going to swing for the fences, you're not going to start your own company."

Mr. Haidt predicts that Gen-Z women will be much less successful than millennial ones. After observing young women who are now in their 20s, he worries that the "gender gap that's been closing very rapidly in many fields over the last couple of decades might begin to widen in the 2030s." Whereas millennial women are doing well, "Gen-Z women, because they're so anxious, are going to be less successful than Gen-Z men—and that's saying a lot, because Gen-Z men are messed up, too."

The problem, he says, is distinct to the U.S. and other English-speaking developed countries: "You don't find it as much in Europe, and hardly at all in Asia." Ideas that are "nurtured around American issues of race and gender spread instantly to the U.K. and Canada. But they don't necessarily spread to France and Germany, China and Japan." Thus America's "supply of young people who are not anxious or depressed will heavily depend on taking people who are not born in an English-speaking country."

The anxiety and fragility at the youthful end of the American workforce is making the labor force troublesome to work with. "This is something I hear from a lot of managers, that it's very difficult to supervise their Gen-Z employees, that it's very difficult to give them feedback." That makes it hard for them to advance professionally by learning to do their jobs better.

At the same time, social media promotes an organizational culture of fear. "If corporations become less effective because everyone's afraid of Twitter, afraid of what will be said about them," he says, "this could severely damage American capitalism." When managers are "afraid to speak up honestly because they'll be shamed on Twitter or Slack, then that organization becomes stupid." Mr. Haidt says he's "seen a lot of this, beginning in American universities in 2015. They all got stupid in the same way. They all implemented policies that backfire."

Mr. Haidt, who describes himself as "a classical liberal like John Stuart Mill," also laments the impact of social media on political discourse: "Social media is incompatible with liberal democracy because it has moved conversation, and interaction, into the center of the Colosseum. We're not there to talk to each other. We're there to perform" before spectators who "want blood."

Is there a solution? "I'd raise the age of Internet adulthood to 16," he says—"and enforce it." Thirteen-year-olds can legally sign up for social-media sites, and millions of much younger children use them. "They just lie about their birthdays. The Internet teaches them that all you have to do is lie and you can go anywhere. That's what we've taught kids so far, and it has to stop."

In the physical world, he observes, "we have more than a hundred years of making things safe for children. We require car seats and seat belts. We eliminated cigarette vending machines. We have fences around pools." By contrast, "life went onto phone-based apps 10 years ago, and the protections we have for children are zero, absolutely zero." The damage to Generation Z from social media "so vastly exceeds the damage from Covid that we're going to have to act."

There may be a glimmer of hope: Adolescents, he says, have an inkling of their own predicament. Mr. Haidt has addressed classes of seventh- and eighth-graders on the perils of social media. "I ask them, 'Would you get off it on your own?' Many are afraid to do that. But when I ask, 'What if nobody could be on? Would that be better?' they mostly say yes."

Gen Z, he says, "is not in denial. They recognize that this app-based life is really bad for them." He reports that they wish they had childhoods more like those of their

parents, in which they could play outside and have adventures with their friends. They see the point of getting off social media, he insists: "So long as it's not just targeting one child but everybody, I believe they'd be very supportive."

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at New York University Law School's Classical Liberal Institute.