



# Millennials in Social Work Field Education

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Over the past few years, Generation Y, also called “Millennials,” has been of great interest to individuals and organizations. Many social work students come from this generation. In the United States, Canada, and many other countries, Millennials are considered to be those who were born between 1980 and 1996 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The dramatic changes in technology, education, and forms of connection, combined with the distinct world events particular to this generation, have left preceding generations of social work educators striving to understand what this may mean in the context of social work education. I have often heard the following comments when I ask colleagues to describe how they experience young adults: “They are entitled; they want to be given leadership positions without earning them; they can’t get off their cell phones and computers; and they are disconnected, sheltered, and checked out.” Social work literature focused on shaping a profile of the “Millennial experience” can help social work educators further our thinking.

## **Who are the Millennials?**

It is important to understand both the psychological and social development of the Millennial Generation, and the environmental pressures on them, in order to tailor social work education to their needs. Arnett’s study of emerging adulthood suggests that young Americans view the transition to adulthood as marked mainly by individualistic character qualities such as accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (2003, 2007). Millennials represent the most racially diverse generation in the history of the United States (Pew, 2009; Applied Research Center, 2011). According to Pew (2009) 39% of Millennials, compared to 27% of the Baby Boomers are members of racial and ethnic minorities. In a 2011 CSWE Annual Survey of Social Work Education, 36% of BSW degrees were granted to social workers from underrepresented communities and 31.9% of Master’s degrees were awarded to social workers from historically under-represented groups. The striving for independence is even more marked for these students of color; for example, 43% of African-Americans, 50% of Latinos, and 35% of Asian-Americans cited gaining full-time work as a need for advancing into adulthood, compared to 19% of whites (Arnett, 2003). However, the social environment for Millennials does not always offer opportunities for them to realize their individual aspirations. Their transition to adulthood has been complicated by high unemployment, student loan debt, and generally difficult economic conditions in a country involved in

costly wars and financial upheavals. When we consider this framework, it becomes apparent just how difficult it may be for young adults to achieve the same levels of independence and autonomy that may have been reached by prior generations. These developmental and social realities have created a generation of students who have been shown to have the following characteristics: high expectations, idealism, a need for safety and structure, and a facility with technology.

### **High Expectations**

Millennials are often described in popular media as “entitled” (60 Minutes, 2008; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyon, 2010). They often cite their parents’ lack of work-life balance and a desire to not replicate that in their own lives (60 Minutes, 2008; Twenge, 2012). Millennials have also developed high expectations. Educational institutions now cater to students; they regard students as consumers and seek to attract them by perks and promises. At the same time that they receive special treatment, Millennials are acutely aware of the competitive environment in which they live. They are aware of how much they are paying for their education and worry about a competitive job market; for this reason, they are extremely concerned about their academic standing, and they expect high grades. In their careers, they hold realistic expectations for salary, but desire rapid advancement and work-life balance (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyon, 2010).

### **Idealism**

Millennial youth may be regarded as entitled, but a 2009 Pew Center report shows that they are, in fact, more idealistic than the previous generation. Generation X, raised during a period of time where Reagan was President, divorce rates in the U.S. were rapidly rising, and the country saw a marked retrenchment of social services, has been sometimes characterized as painfully cynical. In contrast, the Millennial Generation is passionate about its volunteer service and has performed more community service, either as part of their educational experience or independently, than any other generation (Pew, 2009; Strauss, Howe & Strauss, 2000; Twenge, 2012). Additional findings of their report suggest that Millennials have strong ties to their parents; 52% of Millennials, compared to 30% of Baby Boomers, feel that it is their responsibility to move their elderly parents into their homes if necessary (Pew, 2009). Family responsibility is especially strong for youth of color; for example, over 57% of Asian-Americans and 70% of African-Americans and Latinos reported that a man should be financially able to care for his family before being considered an adult, and over 60% felt that was also the case for women, compared to 29% and 30% of whites (Arnett, 2003). Apollon’s reports from the Applied Research Center (2011, 2012) found that Millennials across races believe that tackling racism should be a priority of our government, as well as oppressions of class and the prison industrial complex (ARC 2011, 2012). This is a generation that is overwhelmingly supportive of same-sex marriage, regardless of their political affiliation (Pew, 2009).

### **Structure and Safety**

However, Millennial idealism is different from that of Baby Boomers, forever associated with

protests against Vietnam and multiple radical social movements. Millennial idealism does not seek to overthrow conventional customs and institutions but holds the idea that “social rules can help” (Howe and Strauss, 2000, p. 44). Millennial youth support social rules because they have been raised with significant structure and concern for their own safety. They thrive in situations where expectations are made explicit and ambiguity is limited. As Howe and Strauss (2000) say, Millennials are concerned with “synthesizing, simplifying and lending order” to a complex world. They bring an entrepreneurial spirit to their organizing, as well as a facility with technology.

## **Technology**

Often, it is assumed that the high technology use of Millennials is responsible for their lack of connection. What I have noticed through my experience as a teacher and social worker is that assumptions of disconnection cannot be blamed exclusively on technology and social media use. The reasons why and how individuals engage in social media represent a far more accurate indicator of whether technology is responsible for disconnection. A complex four-stage study conducted in 2011 by Sheldon, Abad, and Hinsche used Facebook to assess the levels of connection and disconnection facilitated by usage of the site. The authors found that social media sites can offer positive rewards for individuals who do not use them as a means of coping with social isolation or disconnection. In contrast, for those who are socially isolated, social media use may offer an outlet for connection, but does not address the challenges to developing in-person relationships (Sheldon, Abad & Hinsche, 2011). “The Occupy movements” illustrate the practical use of technology by idealistic Millennials. With technology, they were able to spread their movement and grievances in a way that was very different than their predecessors. Access to social media afforded this movement the ability to have a bank account to cover the costs of the necessary supplies and permits.

## **Implications for Social Work Education**

Understanding the Millennial Generation’s unique combination of high expectations, idealism and need for structure, and use of technology, can guide social work educators, especially in field education.

### **High Expectations**

Millennial interns’ high expectations can be seen as a plus for field education. Their sincere optimism about their personal potential to be successful can give them confidence. The one-to-one relationship with a field instructor can make them feel special, and they appreciate feedback and approval from a person who is responsible for judging their performance. However, ambition and high expectations can get in the way when it comes to accepting challenging feedback, and they can become anxious if they do not get high marks for their performance. The pressure students may be under to succeed is high, and failure is not an option. Their concern for work-life balance can also undermine their commitment to the field placement; for example, if the field instructor does not provide clarity about what needs to be completed and does not offer ideas for how to spend open time, interns may assume that

they can spend time as they see fit. Interns can be encouraged to use their time to develop self-care activities that support increased capacity for listening and reflection, as well as other forms of professional development. Frequent reference throughout the year to social work competencies outlined in the field manuals, as in the learning plan, creates important scaffolding for evaluation.

### **Structured Idealism**

The idealism of Millennials makes social work education a good fit. They have a commitment to helping, and some experience with direct service. They have a practical approach to advocacy. But their concern with safety and structure may make it difficult to manage the normal anxiety over the complexity of a social work field placement. Millennial interns may expect that field placements should be predictable; for example, they may expect immediate access to information which will alleviate clients' difficulties, and expect change to take place immediately in response to interventions. They may expect the field instructor to have all the answers and to provide exceptionally clear direction. Millennial interns, like all interns, benefit from ongoing reminders that the ambiguities of social work practice are normal and that working within complex systems demands persistence and patience. Provision of regular appointments, appropriate advice, and clear feedback can create a structured holding environment for supervision.

### **Technology**

Millennial interns' facility with technology can be a boon to a field placement: they manage communication systems like chart notes easily, and can often help staff solve computer problems. Millennial interns are aware of possible social connections that can be facilitated through technology, and, as in the case of the "Occupy Movement," they use technology effectively in advocacy. However, interns may become frustrated when agencies are not up to date in their technology. More importantly, Millennial interns and their supervisors may not fully understand the strengths and pitfalls of using technology in social work practice. For example, they may not be aware of potential violations of confidentiality in using Google or Twitter with clients. It is crucial for field instructors and liaisons to have regular discussions with interns about the use of technology in terms of professional identity, behavior, and ethics. Field educators should keep abreast of developments around the use and ethics of technology in social work practice.

## **Summary**

As is the case with any attempt to address a large group of people, not all the information will apply to every social work intern who can be classified as a Millennial. The information presented offers an additional set of perspectives that can be considered to further the learning of some social work interns and offer a broader context for considering challenges to intergenerational relationships. Field instructors and liaisons should acquaint themselves with literature about the Millennial Generation, and especially with the various forms of technology that are engaged by social work interns. Field educators should have an up-front conversation with interns about the importance of inter-

generational collaboration, and be attentive to the strengths that both perspectives bring to the field education experience.

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