

Viva the Vital

July 24, 2008

Maybe Those Whining Boomers Have Reason to Complain

By Matt Thornhill

It seems only fitting that a generation named by an editor at pop-culture icon People magazine would get pop-psychoanalyzed by the media at midlife. Most credit Landon Jones and his book *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*, published in 1981, for coining the term. Jones went on to be editor of People for almost 20 years.

These days everyone from Oprah and Dr. Phil to USA Today is offering not-so-deep thoughts on Boomers in their late 40s, 50s and early 60s. The number of studies, reports, articles and opinions trying to analyze the current mindset of 78 million Americans is overwhelming. From national studies by Pew Research to academic papers written by sociologists and psychologists, to articles by Gen X-age reporters at national newspapers like *The Washington Post*, to blogs penned (with the help of spell check) by wet-behind-the-ear bloggers, everyone wants to weigh in on the unhappy, gloomy, not-the-greatest-by-a-longshot generation: baby boomers.

It started a few years ago when a sociologist named Yang Yang published a smart-pants (OK, let's say a *seminal*) article in an academic journal that concluded that boomers are not only unhappy now, they've been relatively unhappy during most stages of life. Yan argues that this generation's lifelong malaise could be attributed to the fact that there are simply too many boomers. As a result, we've faced more than the typical amount of competition for anything we strived to accomplish, resulting in more failures (in raw numbers) and therefore an overall lower unhappiness score when polled. Call us skeptics on this one.

Other equally smart academics jumped in and determined that older generations were raised with lower expectations, so they were happier with whatever they accomplished. Boomers were oversold by their parents that they could accomplish anything, and when they didn't, they got really bummed out about it. We think this theory might hold more water than the "too many" theory.

More recently, Pew Research also reported that boomers are gloomier at this age (44-62) than were members of the previous generation at the same age. In fact, boomers have scored poorly on unhappiness questions for decades relative to other generations at the same age. We blame the invention of Prozac and the belief that every feeling is a treatable condition for this one.

All this bad news about boomers has been too much for the general media and online bloggers to ignore. Stories about "whining" boomers are everywhere. And while former Sen. Phil Gram, who noted "we're a nation of whiners," didn't mention boomers by name, many seem to think that's who he meant.

The reaction to these stories is also interesting. For every news story or article about the negative attitude of boomers, we've seen defensive comments from boomers who claim they are happy and

content. Plus we've seen even stronger assertions by members of the younger generations who blame boomers for everyone's unhappiness, pointing out specifically how boomers have ruined the country (Medicare, Social Security, the environment, Iraq war). The younger ones lament that boomers need to quit ruining everything and exit stage right.

This recent portrayal of all boomers as gloomy, unhappy whiners seems, quite frankly, dumb. It's dumb because generalizing about the happiness, gloominess or whininess of any group of 78 million citizens is ridiculous. For every statement and assertion made about boomers, there are millions of exceptions. Plus, Dr. Ed Ansello, director of the Virginia Center on Aging at VCU, will tell you that the older any population grows, the more diverse it becomes. Older boomers are far from alike, especially when it comes to happiness. Things like income, education, life stage, marital status, job type and countless other factors certainly impact someone's current happiness. Those are not generational factors.

Look, we know there are plenty of things boomers do that deserve attention. Some good, some bad. On the downside, boomers are, in general, self-centered (not selfish), entitled, and all about personal gratification. But they are also incredibly optimistic and still hard at work changing the world (see: Gore, Al).

These negative media stories about boomers do have a frightening aspect. It occurred to us that the stories are more than unfair, they are prejudicial. Replace the word "boomer" with "woman," "African-American," "Hispanic," or "disabled," and you wouldn't finish reading the piece. You would be outraged. Haven't most of us moved beyond stereotyping people based on some physical dimension? Comedians won't dare say anything about Obama's race, but joke nightly about McCain's age. Maybe "year of birth" is a new kind of generational bigotry, or "genism." If it is, it shouldn't be tolerated.

At least, now we know the real reason so many boomers today are unhappy and gloomy. And whining.