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CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Why Many Baby Boomers Struggle to Embrace Immigration

There was far less immigration during their formative years.

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Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



Research indicates that, in the United States, people from the Baby Boom generation (born between 1945 and 1964) have among the most negative views of international migration overall (Jones, 2016). But why?

At least some of the answer might be found in Glen Elder's life course theory, which states that people's birth year and generation are among the most important determinants of their life experiences and perspectives. Someone born in 1945, for example, is bound to have had vastly different experiences compared to someone born in 1975 or in 2005.

Between 1880 and 1924, millions of Southern and Eastern European immigrants – Jews, Italians, Poles, Russians, and

York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit – became heavily populated by these immigrants, and the sounds of foreign languages filled the air in these places. As time passed, these people (and their children) began to spread out from the centers of these cities into their suburbs. The New York City suburbs of Long Island, for example, became heavily Jewish and Italian beginning in the first decades of the 20th century.

Much as is the case today, xenophobic attitudes were rampant among some native-born U.S. residents (Lee, 2019). There were too many immigrants, they complained. Too many foreign languages were spoken in the streets. "No one" was speaking English.

So, in 1924, the U.S. Congress passed a set of restrictive immigration laws that essentially halted the Southern and Eastern European immigration wave. Strict quotas were placed on almost all countries except those located in north-west Europe, from which the "most desirable" immigrants would originate. So, English, Scottish, Irish, Dutch, and Belgian people remained free to immigrate – but because the waves of immigrants from those countries had long since passed, not many new people came overall. Congress surely knew this would be the result when they passed those new immigration laws. Essentially, there would be low levels of immigration going forward, and indeed, there was little immigration to the United States until quotas were eliminated in 1965.

The net result of this 40-year pause in immigration to the United States was that two generations of young people grew up having very little contact with immigrants. At the end

the rural South, and some northern cities where African Americans had migrated to escape the Southern Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, and outside of Mexican-American communities along the U.S.-Mexico border, and areas near Native American reservations, the average white American was unlikely to encounter many people who weren't fellow white American.

The average white American was also increasingly unlikely to encounter immigrants. Baby Boomers, born between 1945 and 1964, were likely to spend their childhood and adolescence primarily around other U.S.-born whites. Even the Boomers' parents were almost entirely U.S.-born. Their grandparents may have been immigrants, but after spending so much time in the United States, these grandparents likely communicated primarily in English. So the largest generation was largely insulated from contact with immigrants, and diversity – at least in the way we think of it now – was foreign to them during their formative years.

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gration did not really get going until the late 1970s and early 1980s (Congressional Research Service, 2011). This meant that Baby Boomers, especially those born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, didn't begin encountering lots of immigrants until they were in their 30s. Outside of places like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Miami, the diversity ushered in by the new immigration didn't start to change the demographics of most areas in the United States until the late 1990s.

By this time, many Baby Boomers were well into middle age. Baby Boomers living in North Carolina, for example, would have been unlikely to encounter large numbers of immigrants until they were in their 50s. People's attitudes toward immigration are generally formed based their exposure to immigrants in childhood and adolescence (Eger et al., 2022) – so when the diversity explosion began in earnest at the dawn of the 21st century, Baby Boomers were likely unfamiliar (and perhaps uncomfortable) with it.

The 2007 movie *Gran Torino*, starring Clint Eastwood, provides a good example of what many people from the Baby Boom generation experienced following the turn of the 21st century. Eastwood's character is a longtime resident of a community in Michigan where Hmong immigrants have been settling and where the white population has largely moved out.

His doctor is Asian American, as are many of his neighbors and the people who work at local stores. The character shows discomfort with the rapidly changing population

in which they grew up, and many of them are not sure how to react to it.

All of these reasons may help explain many Baby Boomers' reactions to large-scale immigration and the changes it has created in the U.S. population. Rather than label them as xenophobic and racist, perhaps we should try to find ways to help them become more comfortable with the world in which they now live. Their wisdom is precious, and we should try to help them become comfortable enough to share it.

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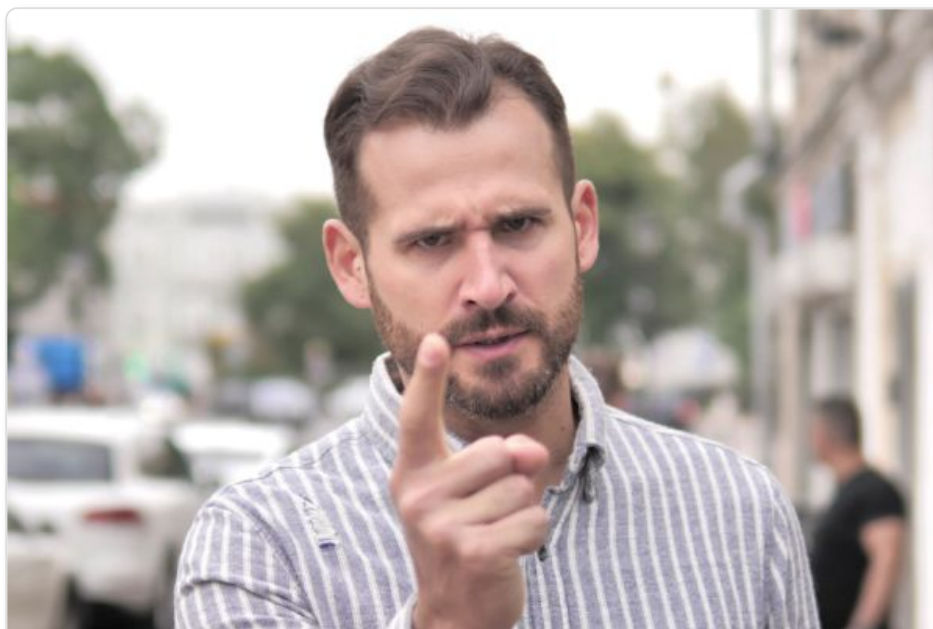


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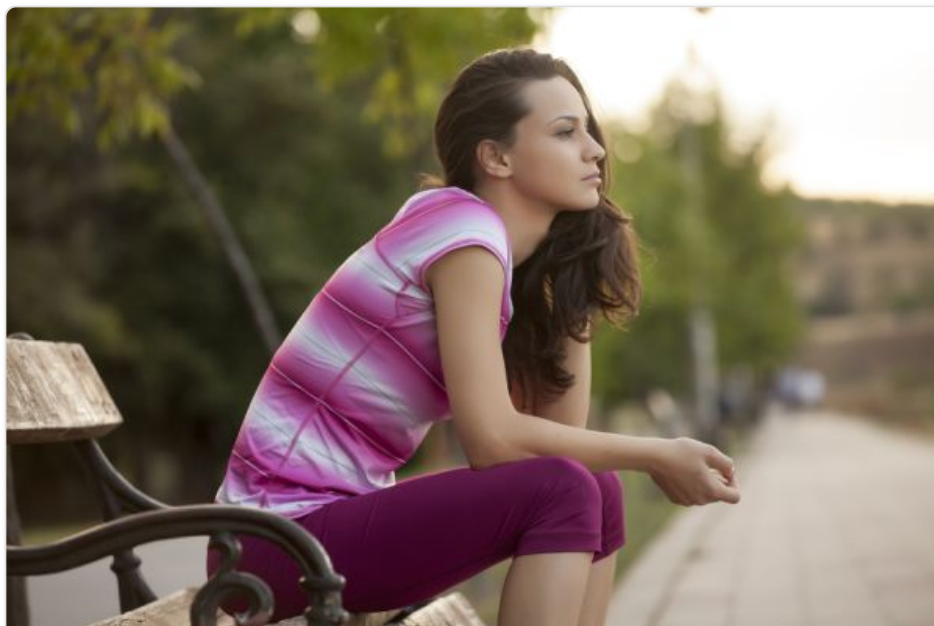


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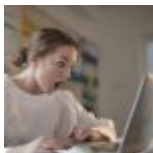
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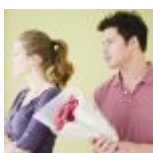
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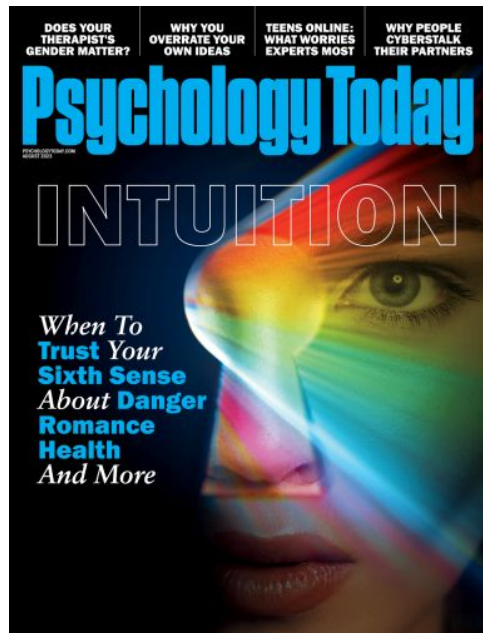
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