

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Kids These Days

They're leaders in important social, environmental and political movements, finding ways to tackle the most pressing issues of our time, from climate change to gun violence. One even stood up to the Taliban at 15 years old and received the Nobel Peace Prize at 17.

And yet, as their elders, we roll our eyes, brush aside their generation as a whole, or, perhaps worse, actively demean them because, well, they're kids.

As it turns out, grumbling about the younger generation is an age-old practice. It's what UC Santa Barbara psychological scientist [John Protzko](#) terms the "kids these days effect."

"Humanity has been lodging the same complaints against 'kids these days' for at least 2,600 years," said Protzko, who capped his estimate at 2.6 millennia only because some of the older statements couldn't be verified. But, it's easy to imagine adults of the past shaking their fists at their kids and their apparent disdain for the rules — "Youth were never more sawcie," wrote minister Thomas Barnes of St. Margaret's Church in 1624, "...the ancient are scorned, the honorable are contemned, the magistrate is not dreaded."

"It's the exact same complaints time after time — they're disrespectful, they don't listen to their elders and they don't like to work," Protzko said, adding that these gripes cut across not only generations, but also cultures.

It's not as though society has been in objective decline since 340 BCE, Protzko said. Rather, he continued, the older generation's tendency to bash its youths is a result of our faulty memories.

"There is a psychological or mental trick that happens that makes it appear to each generation that the subsequent generations are objectively in decline, even though they're not," said Protzko, whose [research](#) appears in the journal *Science Advances*. "And because it's built into the way the mind works, each generation experiences it over and over again."

Despite the ubiquity of this effect — or perhaps because of it — not much research has been conducted to investigate it. To suss out this psychological illusion, Protzko and fellow psychologist Jonathan Schooler devised a suite of five tests.

"We first looked at how this relates to your own standing on a trait," Protzko said. Across three specific traits — respect for authority, intelligence and enjoyment of reading — participants were asked how high they believe the children of today would rate when compared to the participants themselves as kids.

Across the board, it was clear that the higher the participants ranked themselves on those traits, the more likely they were to denigrate the kids based on those same traits, supporting the researchers' "trait-specific" hypothesis.

"The more you respect authority as an adult, the more you think kids no longer respect their elders; the smarter you are, the more you think kids these days are getting dumber," Protzko said. "And people who are well-read tend to think that kids these days no longer like to read."

And with regard to intelligence, that's particularly significant, Protzko noted, because objective evidence has demonstrated that youth are performing better on intelligence test because of Flynn effects (the measurable increase of IQ scores from generation to subsequent generation). "So it can't be the case that the participants are picking up on objective truth," he said.

So what's behind our misjudgment of the generations that follow ours? Protzko blames our own faulty, biased memories.

"We tend to think our memories are really good for the past," he said, "but they aren't." To elucidate the effect of our memory on our attitudes toward kids these

days, the researchers replicated the reading study and then added questions about the participants' memories of how much they and their peers enjoyed reading as children. They also asked for their opinions on "adults these days" and their love of reading.

According to their results, the more well-read you are, the more you think you enjoyed reading as a child, and the more you think all kids enjoyed reading when you were a child. In turn, it appears to us that children today are objectively deficient.

"Basically, what we do is take our current standing on that trait and we impose it back in time," Protzko explained. Not only that, he said, the opinion is extended to peers, so people who consider themselves to have been well-read as children remember children in general being that way. In addition, the responses indicating that adults enjoying reading as much as they did as children suggests that "participants are not sensing a constant generational decline, but instead believe that it is only uniquely children today who are deficient."

To further identify the effect of memory as a mediator, the researchers put participants through one final exercise. Participants were tested to see how well-read they were, but were given false feedback.

"We told some of them they were in the top 33% of the national population or in the bottom 33% of the population," Protzko said. "It turns out that doing that changes how they feel about their own standing about being well-read." The feedback even went so far as to cause the participants to revise their memories of the past, so that when asked about their opinions on kids these days and their reading habits, those that scored "low" not only generalized their performance to kids of the past (e.g., kids before weren't very well-read), but also softened their views on the supposed decline of kids these days with respect to reading.

"These things aren't necessarily happening consciously," Protzko said of the phenomenon memory researchers call "presentism." This bias, he added, is so ingrained in our memory systems that it's unlikely we'll ever stop thinking the kids these days represent a decline in our society.

"It's a memory tic — you take what you presently are and you impose that on your memories," he said, "It's why the 'decline' seems so obvious to us. We have little objective evidence about what children were like, and certainly no personal

objective evidence. All we have is our memory to rely on, and the biases that come with it.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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