

Millennials aren't lazy snowflakes – we just don't expect to work for free

I ask those who accuse us of being vain, entitled and feckless: do you know any real young people? We're the ones slogging away after our shifts have ended

Abi Wilkinson - Thursday 9 February 2017, The Guardian

Millennials, we're told, are one of the great scourges of modern times. With our selfies and hook-up apps and incomprehensible internet slang, my generation is widely condemned as vain, lazy and entitled. It's the "prizes for all" culture we grew up in, you see. Or possibly that damn social media. I've even come across some more outré theories involving consumption of pesticide-tainted produce and subliminal messages in hip-hop. Whatever the reason, it seems that elder folk are largely in agreement: young people are simply no good.

Obviously, this is nothing new. In 1904, the psychologist Granville Stanley warned of "passive stimuli just when an active life is most needed", "the mad rush for sudden wealth" and "a lessening sense for both duty and discipline" among the younger generation. In 1843, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury gave a speech to the House of Commons in which he warned "the morals of children are tenfold worse than formerly". Way back in 1771, a letter sent to Town and Country magazine grumbled about "effeminate, self-admiring, emaciated fribbles" who "can never have descended in a direct line from the heroes of Poitiers and Agincourt".

It's striking how timeless most of these complaints seem. Chuck in the word snowflake and mention social media, and they wouldn't look out of place in the pages of a Sunday newspaper magazine supplement. For all that is universal, though, I've noticed that the details of anti-young people grievances sometimes seem to reveal far more about the specific hangups and neuroses of complainants than the targets of their ire.

Take the interview with "motivational speaker and author" Simon Sinek that is currently doing the rounds. At the age of 43, Sinek is slightly too old to fit into the "millennial" age bracket (commonly defined as comprising people now aged between 20 and 37) but he has some strong opinions on the decline in parenting techniques in the years immediately following his own childhood. (Who knows? Perhaps he had a particularly bratty younger sibling.) Mostly, he simply repeats the familiar clichés: narcissism, excessive yet fragile self-confidence, impatience, lack of commitment. But it's his comments about the behaviour of millennials in the workplace that I find most revealing – particularly the claim that "many millennials leave work on the dot at 5pm every day and refuse to answer work calls or emails over the weekend". Would that it were true. It's possible my social circle is just wildly unrepresentative, but among people I know, taking work home to complete in the evening and at weekends is the depressing norm. I've lost count of the number of times plans have been postponed or cancelled because someone hasn't managed to make it out of the office in time.

Nor is it only millennials in middle-class careers who are subject to this unpaid overtime culture. When I did bar work, managers regularly used to skim our wages by not paying us for time spent cleaning up after closing. Plenty of young people who are paid by the hour report similar experiences, and worry about how to raise the issue without having their shifts cut in revenge. And that is a genuine difference in the workplace experiences of millennials, of course – we're statistically far more likely to be employed on zero-hours, casual or freelance terms. Sinek's suggestion that we bounce from job to job because we're impatient and overly demanding made me chuckle, given that most people I know who change jobs frequently don't do so out of choice.