Article

The 'Boomer remover': Intergenerational discounting, the coronavirus and climate change

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Abstract
Based on an analysis of Twitter data, this article examines the appearance of generational ideas in the ways that people have defined the experience and significance of the coronavirus and climate change, as well as related them to each other. I characterize the narrative frame as one of *intergenerational discounting*: a description of breakdown in reciprocal obligations of care, giving rise to accusations of hypocrisy, expressions of resentment and rage, and the description of the virus as the 'Boomer remover'. This frame normatively licenses withdrawal from intergenerational action in pursuit of collective objectives, as well as erases the disproportionate negative effects of crisis conditions on those facing intersecting intragenerational disadvantages. In addition to analysing a strategic but thus far unexplored data source for social problems theory and the sociology of generations – tweets – the article contributes to this scholarship by demonstrating how generational ideas work to morally link different conditions to each other.

Keywords
climate change, coronavirus, generations, social problems, Twitter

As the novel coronavirus spread around the world in early 2020, a story about generations quickly developed. It was clear early on that the epidemiology had a generational dimension, with older people getting sicker and being more likely to die from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. A story about generational kinship relations also emerged: grandparents missing out on time with grandchildren; adult children being unable to comfort or say goodbye to their dying parents. We have also had to contemplate cohort effects: the long-term psychological and educational impacts of lockdowns on children; the economic and professional setbacks faced by Millennials in the middle of their careers.

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The pandemic unfolded against the backdrop of intensifying climate change. Here, too, claims about generations are central to the discourse, particularly around the question of what intergenerational justice requires in terms of care for the planet. Philosophers have debated this problem in moral terms; psychologists relate it to the cognitive limitations of our empathic imagination; economists have addressed it as a technical matter of arriving at a discount rate. In recent years, the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, who inspired a global wave of climate strikes, notably by schoolchildren, as well as the youth-led Sunrise Movement, have framed their activism in generational terms. Young people today are not the 'architects of this nightmare', in the words of Sunrise, but they are the agents of its undoing.

This article explores how generational ideas work to define social problems through examining the story of generations that emerges at the intersection of these two crises. To do so, I bring together and build upon two sociological traditions: the sociology of social problems and the sociology of generations. The analysis reveals the appearance of 'generationalism' (White, 2013) and particularly a kind of 'generational grievance' (Bristow, 2021) in the ways that people have defined the experience and significance of the coronavirus and climate change, as well as related them to each other. The analysis is based on data collected for a larger project involving thematic hand-coding of over 9000 tweets published in March 2020, when the coronavirus became a global pandemic. I find that this generational grievance is expressed more specifically as a narrative about *intergenerational discounting*: a description of breakdown in reciprocal moral obligations of care, giving rise to accusations of hypocrisy, expressions of resentment and rage, and the suggestion that COVID-19's disproportionate effects on older people is a kind of karmic retribution for their failure to address climate change, which will more negatively affect younger people, making the virus the 'Boomer remover'.

The findings here contribute to an understanding of how generational ideas work to define social problems. Generational ideas appear not only to narrate crisis conditions and experiences, as other scholars have observed; they also work to morally link those conditions to each other. In this case, perceived reciprocal generational failures normatively sanction withdrawal from coordinated action in pursuit of collective objectives. Global conditions of pandemic and climate change demand high levels of intergenerational solidarity, but the specific contours of generational grievance here illuminate why that may be difficult to realize in practice. At the same time, intergenerational discounting effaces the disproportionate negative effects of *both* crises on marginalized people facing intersecting intragenerational disadvantages related to class, race, gender, nation and region.

Social problems as generational ones

In 1971, Harold Blumer wrote that 'students of social problems ought to study the process by which a society comes to recognize its social problems' (p. 300). Material outcomes of suffering, death, decline and disruption are invested with meaning – and become identifiable social problems, with particular features – through the interpretive practices of individuals and collective actors; the symbolic construction of narratives that explain those outcomes; and classification struggles that consign actors and events to

various roles and positions therein. In the decades since Blumer's writing, studies in social problems theory have focused in particular on definitional processes, claims-making, and rhetoric (Best, 1987, 2016; Gubrium, 1986; Holstein & Miller, 1993; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977/2001): in brief, 'the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions' (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977/2001, p. 75). These assertions matter because, Blumer went on, 'The societal definition gives the social problem its nature, lays out how it is to be approached, and shapes what is done about it' (p. 300). Put to this case, if we want to make sense of how people respond to the circumstances created by the pandemic and climate change, it helps to understand how they make sense of those circumstances, that is, the ways people construct political and moral narratives of cause and effect, heroes and villains, and triumph and failure.

Social problems theory provided the warrant for undertaking the research; the appearance of claims about generations in the data invites a turn to the sociology of generations for further explication of the findings. There some scholars have shifted the object of enquiry from one of empirically demarcating substantialist generations as such (and thereby explaining their significance in processes of historical change, social conflicts and cultural transmission, e.g. Edmunds & Turner, 2002a, 2002b; Kertzer, 1983; Mannheim, 1952/1970; Pilcher, 1994) to one of examining appeals to 'generational thinking' or 'generationalism' (White, 2013), in public discourse. This scholarship has critically interrogated the deployment of generational claims, highlighting the empirical murkiness of their referents (Roberts & France, 2021), the contradictions in their implications (Bristow, 2021), and the political significance of how they are used to narrate social conditions and events – especially where generations are represented in a simplified, stereotyped, or exaggerated form (Airey et al., 2021; Bristow, 2015, 2016, 2019; Martin & Roberts, 2021; Somers, 2017). The objective of this body of research is not to dispense with generation as mere fiction, but rather to see the deployment of 'generation' as the articulation and application of a particular category of analysis and practice that *itself* warrants examination (White, 2013).

For my purposes, these more recent developments in the sociology of generations open up questions that explore fuzziness rather than resolve it, asking what we can learn from witnessing how people invoke and stretch the concept of generation to make different kinds of claims (e.g. Holleran, 2021). How is the 'multi-vocality' (Kertzer, 1983, p. 125) of generation articulated and mobilized? How are the 'personalities' of different generations characterized? What are they deemed responsible for? How are they valorized or villainized? My approach offers a perspective that is 'sensitive to the struggle over the definitions and classifications of people in terms of generations that are never purely descriptive, but are loaded with many kinds of normative attributes and meanings' (Purhonen, 2016, p. 106). Of particular importance to my approach is Jennie Bristow's (2021) concept of 'generational grievance', rather than the more commonly invoked 'generational conflict'. 'Grievance' more aptly captures the spirit of *complaint*, whereas 'conflict' can be interpreted as involving a claim of manifest material struggle between cohorts (e.g. over resources). I do not seek, nor do my data allow, claims about the attachment of these utterances to specific demographic cohorts, nor do I argue that intergenerational discounting is the 'accurate' way to characterize how the coronavirus and

climate change have really affected different cohorts. Indeed, the point is in some ways to let go of the idea of cohort in order to highlight the place of *claims* about what generations in fact are, remaining open to the fact that their narration can involve complex elisions and admixtures of ideas about cohort with ideas about kinship, life stage and historical period.

Data and methods

The findings in this article derive from Twitter data, analysed as part of a larger project designed to capture the range of themes in how people articulated connections between the coronavirus and climate change, after I had observed some such connections being made not only on social media but also in op-eds and news articles. Generational grievance emerged inductively as a prominent and provocative theme. My focus here on Twitter data – the content of tweets in this case – offers a novel angle of view for social problems theory and the sociology of generations, both of which have tended to privilege empirically traditional news media, social movement actors and other public figures. Social problems theorists have been calling for greater attention to social media. As Spector (2019) recognizes, while 'these claims-makers and social movements still exist . . . times have changed. The constituencies and resources that can be assembled instantly through social media have radically altered the landscape of social disapproval' (p. 179). This kind of data also offers substantive advantages related to definitional processes. Social media provide a 'narrative environment' where communicative practices 'play out in the *heres* and *nows* of everyday life' (Gubrium, 2005, p. 527). Researchers can observe spontaneous expression on topics of genuine interest and relevance to users, unprompted by the researcher (in contrast to, for instance, a research interview). The data can capture expression of different 'takes' in the moment rather than relying on a retrospective accounting of what a person thought, felt, or believed at a previous juncture.

On the question of generational claims, Twitter data also provide an as yet unexplored facet of the public discourse. Studies of 'generational thinking' have thus far drawn on evidence from newspaper articles, op-eds and books written by political and media elites (e.g. Bristow, 2016, 2021; Somers, 2017; White, 2013). Other studies emphasize the importance of intellectuals for expressing the traumas that constitute generational experience and identity (e.g. Edmunds & Turner, 2002a). Elites and intellectuals do wield disproportionate power to shape public discourse, and the ideas expressed on Twitter undoubtedly reflect their influence. But we ought to be empirically interested in the undirected talk of generations taking place in the online spaces where people respond to the views put forward by political and media elites and where potentially new and non-mainstream views can emerge, consolidate, 'go viral' and further influence public understandings.

As Spector (2019) notes, taking stock of the field of social problems theory, where there has not been discussion of 'going viral', he observes, 'we have to deal with it now' (p. 179). The potential of virality is perhaps particularly high for Twitter. Its 'publicness' sets it apart from other social media networks, as non-reciprocal connections encourage the reading of tweets beyond one's personal networks, and the use of hashtags can facilitate ad hoc publics coming together around particular topics (Humphreys et al., 2014;

Marwick & boyd, 2011; Tinati et al., 2014). Tweets can also reach beyond the platform when news organizations cover them or when content gets cross-posted to other social media platforms. Of course, Twitter cannot be taken as a normatively ideal or statistically representative public sphere.[1] As such, my claims here do not extend to the numerical incidence of generational thinking among 'the public' writ large, nor can or do I argue that these attitudes broadly characterize the views of specific cohorts. The data also pertain to the English-language Twitterverse, rather than to a specific national or regional context. Location data are provided at the user's discretion. Most choose not to specify a location and some provide non-geographic locations (e.g. 'on the right side of history'). While this does present a limitation, in that I cannot geographically contextualize tweets (though many tweets do reference national political figures and local events), for the present analysis the borderlessness of the data does correspond to the truly global nature of both crises, as well as action in response. My objective, like others who have used such data, is to reveal and discuss the character and significance of what is said, to uncover and describe *what circulates* as information, opinion and sentiment – a circulation that is in any case not nationally bounded (Stewart, 2016).

The larger project involved hand-coding and thematic analysis of 9362 tweets, posted to Twitter from 3 to 31 March 2020. This was the month when the WHO labelled COVID-19 a pandemic. The United States, United Kingdom and European Union first imposed various travel restrictions to try to control the spread of the virus. National lockdowns went into effect in the UK and some European countries, as did stay-at-home directives in many US states. Some of the first economic stimulus measures were also passed before the end of March in the US, UK, and other countries. In brief, in the broader context of a protracted pandemic that first took hold months earlier, March 2020 was when policymakers and publics in much of the world began to figure out what exactly the threat was, how to explain it, and how to respond.

I collected the tweets using George Washington University Library's TweetSets database of coronavirus- or COVID-related tweets (Kerchner & Wrubel, 2020).[2] I collected *all* original and reply tweets that included the word 'climate' or the phrase 'climate change'. I excluded retweets. My research aim was to identify the range of themes in the data, so rather than code the same tweet multiple times as it was retweeted, I rely on retweet and favourite count data for a measure of tweet popularity (most tweets are never retweeted). The coding of tweets proceeded as qualitative analysis of other texts often does: by making sequential 'passes' at the data, moving from more open coding to more focused coding. The first pass at the data proceeded inductively; I had no pre-set codes. This yielded 32 codes. The second pass at the data involved reorganizing those codes: combining some, breaking up others, and nesting codes. This ultimately produced a scheme of 16 codes, with some having nested codes therein. The number of tweets under any individual (non-exclusive) code ranged from 7 to 860, with an average of 268. The code 'generational claims' applied to 275 tweets. As the analysis developed, I also revisited the tweets that I had coded under 'activism or activists' to identify a further 264 tweets specifically referencing Greta Thunberg.[3] (Other inductively generated themes, which may be the subject of separate analyses, related to the role of science/expertise in both crises; what lessons we might apply from one to the other; the economic consequences of both; comparisons of urgency/importance; among others).

The data collection techniques used here yield only tweets that are publicly available. Even still, sensitivity to matters of privacy is warranted, as Twitter is a research site 'where communications are by default public but not necessarily intended for all publics' (Stewart, 2016, p. 262; see also Mejova et al., 2015). As such, in the presentation of findings, I do not publish the Twitter handles of individual users when quoting tweets directly. Of course, the quoted tweets are still searchable but, following the guidance of the British Sociological Association's Digital Research Ethics Annexe (2016), I do not pose additional threats to privacy over and above those that already exist from posting a public tweet that can go viral and spread to publics beyond one's followers.

Intergenerational discounting

In my analysis, I am attentive to how generational grievance is expressed in ways that elide differences between what we might otherwise recognize as distinct cohorts; mix ideas about generations as life stage, kinship relations and historical period; and invoke but also stretch conventional generational labels (e.g. 'Boomer', 'Millennial', 'Gen Z'). First, the simple fact of these elisions, mixtures and stretching highlights the plasticity and potency of generation as a register for making claims. But moreover, this reveals something important about the character of some contemporary definitional processes related to social problems. The form of expression on Twitter is quite different from that in articles, op-eds and books. Tweets are short by design; they do not lend themselves terribly well to exploration of nuance. Reductive and catchy ideas – like the 'Boomer remover' – cascade easily. Claims can go viral without the analytical consistency or logical coherence that (we hope) more traditional editorial processes will yield. The virality of a sentiment or idea does not necessarily mean that it becomes an authoritative claim. But it does invite reflection on how the collective definitional process may be constituted more by a kind of interactive sloganeering than by lengthy or complex argumentation.

Twitter users connected climate change and the coronavirus as both revealing and constitutive of a breakdown in reciprocal moral obligations of care between older and younger generations. This is one way the coronavirus gets described as *like* climate change in March 2020. The claim is that older generations, with the Boomers (typically defined as those born in the two decades after the Second World War; Martin & Roberts, 2021) often singled out, squandered the opportunity to make meaningful inroads on mitigating the worst effects of climate change, for the sake of their children and future generations. For their part, younger generations were perceived to be showing a cavalier attitude towards social distancing and other risk mitigating behaviours, which would protect older people hit harder by COVID-19. One Twitter user, invoking generation to express life stage at the present time, described this as:

> 2-way intergenerational discounting: #coronavirus -> young discounts old ('I'm young so COVID won't get me - meh, no social distance needed') #climatechange -> old discounts young ('I'm old so I'll be gone before climate change hits - meh, no GHG mitigation needed')

I adopt and expand this user's term 'intergenerational discounting' as an evocative way to describe the more general narrative in the data. Intergenerational discounting is also

an academic and public policy concept, developed by economists who have debated how or whether, empirically and ethically, to account for the preferences and fates of future generations in decisions today about resource use and spending, particularly on environmental projects (Sumaila & Walters, 2005). Those debates have turned largely on the question of which technical approach for arriving at a discount rate is soundest. Though discounting, as a general method, predates economists' engagement with questions of climate change, it has been a prominent point of contention in their efforts to shape public policy in this area (e.g. the debate between the economists William Nordhaus and Sir Nicholas Stern; see Jamieson, 2014 for a history). It is therefore perhaps not surprising to see that the idea and term 'intergenerational discounting' have a life in the public discourse where climate change is discussed. However, in its appearance on Twitter, 'intergenerational discounting' is deployed in a non-technical and more capacious sense to comment on observed features of social life. It is also, in contrast to its academic uses, 'two-way', commenting on not only what earlier or older generations must do for later or younger generations (the key policy question for economists), but also the reverse. For my purposes here, intergenerational discounting captures specifically how climate change and the coronavirus are characterized as crises that require members of one 'generation' to take steps that curtail their present well-being in order to benefit members of another. Older and younger people are relying on each other to make changes that may not benefit them directly and which amount to some kind of sacrifice (though in reality, of course, everyone benefits from avoiding illness and mitigating climate change). As another user put it:

> Young people to old people: Climate change will kill us all, you MUST change all behaviours. . .
> Old people to young people: COVID19 will kill us all, please stop going to the club. . .
> #COVID19 #Isolate #SocialDistancing

What makes these crises similar is not only that their harms have a generational dimension. It is also the grievance at their core: that older and younger generations have discounted each other in addressing these crises. These mutual failures should be understood as linked:

> Young want old to reverse climate change cause it will harm them. Old laugh and do nothing. It's not harming the old. Now old want young to social distance because coronavirus can harm them. Young laugh and party on. It's not harming the young. #ClimateChange #COVID19 #ironic

Users express this logic – that the perceived malign indifference of younger generations to coronavirus relates or responds to the same perceived malign indifference of older generations to climate change – in the service of distinct moral arguments and accompanied by a range of sentiments. Some users highlight broken social relations and suggest that these can and should be repaired, with occasional reference to specific generational labels:

> The way the baby boomer generation feels about #COVID19 is the way millennials feel about climate change. The world needs to unite on all topics that hurt people, animals and the earth. We're all in this together!

> We are taking some pretty Herculean steps even risking financial peril to counter something that more greatly effects older Americans, and we should. But, after this passes maybe some reciprocity & hard decisions addressing climate change? Okay? Boomer? #COVID19 #ClimateChange

> The younger generation helps their elderly survive #covid19 and in return the older generation helps us stop climate change.

> Old people . . .we will stay in more if you take climate change seriously #COVID19 #coronavirus #CoronavirusOutbreak #CoronaApocalypse

> Fellow millennials / Gen Z-ers:
> Remember when we pleaded with other generations to change behaviour and save us from a (#climate) crisis that wouldn't impact them the same way?
> Now's our chance to show 'em how it's done. #StayAtHome #SocialDistancing #COVID19

That last tweet was retweeted 102 times and liked another 394. These users suggest that these two crises can be addressed if a reciprocity of care and action is (re)established between generations, whether through genuine solidarity ('we're all in this together') or a more contractual bargain, where specific generations, or the 'young' and 'old' broadly described, take commensurate steps to address each other's concerns.

More commonly, though, users express irritation, resentment and rage, suggesting that the discounting of the old by the young now is in fact morally justified *because of* the failure of elders to respond adequately to climate change:

> I've heard multiple baby boomers say that they either don't believe in climate change or don't care because they will be dead by then. Yet now the boomers want the young people to stop everything to protect them and their future? #Hypocrisy #climatechange #covid19 #coronavirus

The '#hypocrisy' of the Boomers comes in for particular censure:

> Boomers Pre #covid19 : We don't care about Climate Change we'll be dead.
> Boomers Post #covid19 : Will you kids think about someone else for a change?

> So old people are taking impending doom serious now that there's a super virus but not the impending doom they created with man made climate change #COVID–19 #coronavirus #okayboomer

> Watching how the US has ignored climate change which will inordinately impact Millennials/ Gen Z versus economy shutting down for #COVID19 which impacts boomers is truly the final betrayal of the children by the 'pull up the ladder after you got to the top' generation.

In perhaps its most extreme form, anger finds expression in grim acclaim of the coronavirus as the 'Boomer remover', incapacitating or even killing a generation that is faulted for failing to protect its children, grandchildren and future generations from the worst impacts of climate change, among other sins. The 'final betrayal' may allude to the way Boomers have been seen as 'responsible for attempting to discard many of the

public goods of which they themselves were the principal recipients', such as affordable health care, housing and education; Martin & Roberts, 2021, p. 728). One of the most retweeted tweets in the dataset (258 retweets; 1014 likes) lists climate change along with other perceived failures of the Boomers (with specific reference to events in the UK):

> BREAKING: The generation who caused the climate crisis & killed the housing market & privatised public services & crippled the NHS & enabled austerity & Windrush & every other post-war outrage. . .
>
> . . . are absolutely furious ungrateful kids have dubbed #COVID19 the BOOMER REMOVER!

This tweet captures policy changes that have eroded both actual outcomes and optimism related to overall security and life chances, particularly for younger people who cannot rely on inheriting privilege or assets. The connection of climate change to this is perhaps resonant because, as with the coronavirus, at stake is life itself. The 'Boomer remover' expresses an extreme frustration with living in the face of profound existential threats:

> tbh [to be honest] I have very little empathy for 50-75 yr olds getting upset about #COVID19 being referred to as the #BoomerRemover since their shitty climate justice politics are essentially an all-of-our-planet's-lifeforms-and-biodiversity remover.
>
> I'm not all that religious. But the #coronavirus does seem like and act of God to to remove Boomers from the planet before they kill is all with their non-action on climate change.
>
> Baby Boomers: Exploiting earth for resources and causing climate change with no regard for future generations.
>
> 2020: *With #COVID19 or as its known for its deadlier name #BoomerRemover*

The phrase 'Boomer remover' first appeared on Twitter on 29 February 2020, when a user tweeted: 'I heard someone call the coronavirus the "boomer remover".' In the following weeks, several tweets using the phrase quickly garnered tens of thousands of likes and retweets. By the morning of 13 March, 'Boomer remover' was trending on Twitter in the US and use of the hashtag peaked on the following day. 'Boomer remover' also appeared on the r/memes subreddit and Google searches of the term peaked in the week from 15 to 21 March. It was most typically associated with teens, a kind of disturbing embellishment of the 'OK Boomer' meme, a mocking retort to the Boomers for being old-fashioned and out of touch, which spread widely in 2019 (Martin & Roberts, 2021). Indeed, one user described COVID-19 as 'Mother Nature's ultimate #okboomer to a generation that has done little but destroy the environment while denying climate change exists'. The term became controversial outside of Twitter, covered by journalists and columnists in newspapers and news magazines over the course of March 2020. *Newsweek* characterized it as a 'battleground for generational warfare on social media, frequently couched as a natural consequence of how the Baby Boomer generation has treated the planet or approached politics' (Whalen, 2020). A columnist for the *Financial Times* suggested the 'Boomer remover' reflects 'the free floating political anger that the current

generation of young people have for their elders', in part because they view Boomers as complicit in global warming (Foroohar, 2020). Others characterized it as a 'nihilistic catchphrase' (*New York Post*, Sparks, 2020) used by 'a horrible subset of the internet' (*Business Insider*, Hoffower, 2020).

Of course, it is hard to discern the intensity of feeling behind something like the 'Boomer remover', just as it is often hard to discern in the tweets who or what users of the term specifically have in mind. A critique of *social* intergenerational relations exists in ambiguous relationship to one's *individual* kinship relations; presumably, most people do not want the Boomers they know and love to die. In the press surrounding the term, some writers pointed out that it seemed mostly a case of very dark humour – though a brand of humour that expressed 'a disregard for older people that isn't funny', in the view of a *Chicago Tribune* columnist (Schmich, 2020). But the truth of the 'Boomer remover', even if said in jest, seems a kind of smug satisfaction at the suggestion of an overdue and warranted comeuppance. It may also express the hope of getting the Boomers – to the extent they behave as an active voting bloc – out of the way, as implied by the user above who suggested that the pandemic could 'remove' Boomers and thereby also end their 'non-action' on climate change. In the Twitter data, even where the phrase 'Boomer remover' was not used explicitly, this idea of generationally defined comeuppance was expressed in other ways, for instance:

Climate change deniers = boomers
People with a higher chance of dying from coronavirus = boomers
[side-eye emoji] Y'all do be saying God works in mysterious ways #coronavirus #Covid_19 #boomers

From a climate perspective a virus that kills old people while children are immune seems fair #coronavirus

Spicy hot take of the day: What if the solution to climate change inaction and political decisions that financially cripple younger generations is. . .. #coronavirus

To the old people that said 'why do I care it won't affect me' about climate change who are now on the other side of the equation: #coronavirus [gif of Morgan Freeman saying 'good luck']

you know millennial's could (not that im advocating this being in 'high risk group')
if they wanted to, just have 70s style herpes party's for #COVID19 then just wander about and let nature take its course and reduce the boomer population who are pushing continued climate change

Could it be that Mother Earth, (bless her fiery core) has created #coronavirus to kill all boomers (aka climate change deniers) with a 20%+ death rate and keep all the children and babies alive (with less than 1% rate) for her own future wellbeing? Well played, Mother.

We can read the emergence of the 'Boomer remover' as coherent with a longer history of fascination with the Baby Boomers, a generation that has 'been watched, commented upon, and invested with hope and despond in equal measure' (Bristow, 2019,

p. 92). This fascination has taken a more negative turn towards 'Boomer blaming' in the last 15 years. The Boomers have themselves become social problems, 'folklore demons' who, for their sheer number, are feared for the unprecedented burdens they may place on welfare states: a 'Boomergeddon' created by a 'tidal wave of retirements', combined with longer lifespans (Bristow, 2019, p. 92; Bristow, 2016; Somers, 2017; Walker, 1990, 1996). Fears about the impacts of an ageing population have then been moralized, turned into a critique of the attitudes and behaviours of this particular generation, namely, their perceived individualism run amok and selfish, hedonistic, reckless actions that have 'robbed' their children of a prosperous future (Bristow, 2016; White, 2013). The Boomers are maligned for the *kind of people* they are believed to be, today serving as the 'archetypal 'villain' in the narrative of generational conflict' (Bristow, 2021, p. 768). Younger generations are then made out to be the true adults in the room, who have to take responsibility for the messes their elders have made (expressed also by some on Twitter, like the user above who suggested young people might 'show 'em how it's done'). In this case, broadly available tropes about the Boomers' perceived sins and deficiencies get attached to 'older generations' generally, in a context in which the cohort most at risk of dying from the virus actually seems to be those over the age of 80 – the so-called 'silent generation' rather than the Boomers. The generational grievance on Twitter encompasses people who are generally older now, in terms of life stage, and a culturally resonant demographic group (itself contested and indeterminate, sometimes described as really two distinct birth cohorts) that has often been used to define and characterize the significance of specific historical periods and social changes. Bristow (2021) notes that in narratives of 'Boomer blaming' the Millennials are typically assigned the symbolic role of victim. Here, the 'younger' generations implicated in intergenerational discounting variously include Millennials, Generation Z, or 'teens' or 'kids'. One user even described the emergence of a 'Generation C': C for climate, COVID, and 'carry-on'. What this murkiness may point to is a shared sense that there is a significant break between the Boomers and everything and everyone that followed. On experiential and sentimental levels, the differences *between* the post-Boomer cohorts matter less than the simple fact that they are *all* post-Boomer.

Some Twitter users, who seem to identify as of an older generation, express understanding of the frustrations of the young:

> Random thought: Health experts are pleading w/young people to self-isolate to prevent the spread of #COVID19 so their elders might survive. I know they will. I hope we return the favor when youth ask us to act on climate change, so they might also have a future.

> Young people have been watching older generations ignore scientists and experts about climate change for years. Now we are going to scold them and call them stupid for ignoring scientists and experts about the Coronavirus and their Spring Break plans? #coronavirus #bradysluder

> My 18 year old son pointed out that blaming young people for spreading #COVID19 is an example of the entitled double standard. The very same people bitching about it are people who don't give a shit about leaving a world fucked by climate change for the future they face.

They acknowledge an intergenerational duty that needs to be lived up to (in the last tweet, expressed in terms of familial generations), and the hypocrisy of demanding consideration and protection from the coronavirus when they have failed to provide it themselves, in relation to climate change.

Intergenerational discounting, however, is not just a new phase of 'Boomer blaming' in this context. Some users direct censure right back at younger generations, suggesting that the hypocrisy lies in how younger people demand action on climate change that involves personal sacrifice, but won't make corresponding sacrifices to stop the spread of coronavirus. The 'Spring Break plans' referenced above refer to media coverage of US college students partying, particularly on the beaches of Florida, behaviour that was then identified as a major source of transmission of the virus. '#bradysluder' names an infamous college student on spring break who, in an interview with NBC News that went viral, said 'If I get corona, I get corona. At the end of the day, I'm not going to let it stop me from partying.' The comments were widely condemned. On Twitter later in the month, a short video of 24-year-old comedian Princezee licking a New York City subway pole went viral (he later claimed he used a prop tongue). The shock and disgust with which it was met as people retweeted and commented on it faulted younger people for their self-righteousness with regard to climate change:

> Just remember THESE are the people who are lecturing us about OUR CRIMES of not supporting their DEMANDS on climate change, and pre-school transvestite story tellers!
> They are the LEADERS of our future. We are in good hands(not!).

> Just remember. . .this is our future and the same ones lecturing us about climate change and politics #COVID19

> Millenials sounded the alarm on climate change. Now their actions could literally kill another human. Mainly the matriarchs and patriarchs of our families. How can you preach 'save the world', and give the finger to humanity all in one breath. #coronavirus #Millennials

> All you #youngpeople who cry about nature and climate change and so on. . .
> You are the main reason for #COVID19 spread and you are causing more short term lethal harm that can wipe out the entire human race
> #StaySafeStayHome #COVID2019 #covid19UK #covid–19uk

These tweets articulate a rejection of the generational claims that have achieved renewed salience recently with the global spread of 'school strikes for climate', inspired by the activism of Greta Thunberg. Thunberg's stark moral claims are made in the voice of children failed by their parents. These aren't abstract future generations anymore; the climate crisis is here, hurting the kids you know and love. 'You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words', Thunberg told world leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit in September 2019. 'You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. . . And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.' Thunberg lays ownership of the climate crisis at the feet of older generations; it is 'your CO_2' she told the adults in attendance and 'you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is' (quoted in National Public Radio, 2019). Her generational

language offers a 'new register of mobilization' (White, 2013, p. 235) that asserts a broad commonality of experience for children globally, while also personalizing the issue with intergenerational kinship references that evoke familial obligation, affection and concern.

Thunberg has inspired millions of people, of all ages – children and their parents and grandparents – to strike for climate action around the world. But she is a target of particular vitriol on Twitter, where some users regard her as representative of the 'Current Gen Z Climate Change Brats' and 'whining little bedwetting pissants' who have joined her protests. Some users accuse her of 'grandstanding' on climate change while ignoring the 'real' crisis of the pandemic. Others mock her efforts, suggesting that the coronavirus has done more for climate change (by temporarily lowering greenhouse gas emissions) than her activism ever did. Some suggest that the coronavirus is, in the words of one user, 'the new climate change #fearporn' of the kind propagated by Thunberg. In these tweets, Thunberg seems to symbolize the impudent self-righteousness of the young, whose rebellion is met with eye-rolling, recrimination and anger.

In the data examined here, the coronavirus and climate change are described as similar, in the sense that both can be explained in some way by the failures of the generations to look out for one another. But moreover, this intergenerational discounting morally connects the two crises, situating one failure as retribution for another.

The political uses of intergenerational discounting

In the public discourse captured on Twitter, generational grievance emerged as a salient register in which some people linked the coronavirus and climate change, in the early phase of the virus's global spread. Intergenerational discounting narrates the causes and effects of ongoing and unfolding crisis conditions, as well as their moral and experiential importance. But what is the significance of defining social problems in these terms, that is, as problems that are explainable with reference to generational failures and linked through a breakdown of intergenerational relations?

Generation is an 'amplifier', highlighting the enormous number of people affected by a crisis (White, 2013, p. 225). Both the coronavirus and climate change are global in scope. The idea of generation describes a mass phenomenon, a designation all of humanity can ascribe to, and thereby seems to meet that scope. But just as emphasis on the global nature of crises obscures variation and inequality in their local effects, generational grievances elide significant differences between individuals that determine how they are situated vis-a-vis suffering, hardship and death. The rhetorical figure of the prosperous (white) Boomer is itself a generalization that ignores, for instance, that in the US and the UK the largest proportion of the postwar cohorts is not and never has been wealthy. In some respects, the entire Baby Boomer discourse is an American export that has grafted American cultural and moral understandings of who the Boomers are and why they might be a 'problem' to other national contexts (Bristow, 2016). As for their younger counterparts, while it is broadly true that today's young adults and children will face much more dire planetary conditions than their Boomer relations, intragenerational differences of class, race, gender, nation and region profoundly shape who will face the

most significant forms of loss as the climate changes. The impacts of COVID-19 – and the economic recession in its wake – have also shown considerable socioeconomic and racial disparity. Generational grievance, and the kinds of accusations expressed by intergenerational discounting, obscure this relevant diversity and project a homogeneity of intent, action and outcome on entire groups of people (Martin & Roberts, 2021; White, 2013). This caricatures and mystifies the causes and conditions of crisis, turning them into 'the problem of people' (Bristow, 2016, p. 586) rather than connecting them to, in this case, what might otherwise be interpreted as failures of leadership, international cooperation and coordination, and regulation. People may criticize the moral failures of their (abstracted, caricatured) elders or juniors, rather than recognize their mutual imbrication in political and economic systems that have allowed powerful actors to slow progress on stemming both climate change and the spread of the coronavirus.

As White (2013) has observed, generationalism is politically pliable; it can be harnessed to a variety of political projects associated with the left or right and used to build solidarity or stoke resentment. As discussed above, Thunberg and other youth climate activists use generational language to build a broad-based movement for climate action that calls upon intergenerational familial and social obligations and transcends other social divisions. Others, invested in conservative political projects, have used generationalism to mount a critique of the welfare state, in which older generations, and the Boomers in particular, are 'greedy geezers' who are saddling their children and grandchildren with a mountain of national debt that must be serviced at the expense of collective investments in education, job training, and other initiatives that benefit the young (Martin & Roberts, 2021; Somers, 2017; Street & Cossman, 2006). The generations are at odds, squaring off in a zero-sum conflict.

As we've seen, intergenerational discounting can be pointed in both directions. It diagnoses a breakdown in intergenerational obligations, which some cite as grounds for repair. People may connect the coronavirus to climate change to try to evoke fellow-feeling, to make each generation understand, and respond with care to, the existential dread facing the other. Linking the pandemic to climate change in this way serves as a moral call to collective action. More commonly, though, intergenerational discounting connects the coronavirus to climate change in the service of a kind of resignation to mutual destruction. To make progress, both crises require solidarity across a range of social divisions and particularly intergenerationally. But intergenerational discounting undermines the sentiment, pushed by national governments, public health experts and activists, that 'we're all in this together':

> Listening to a bunch of teen girls giggle about #coronavirus at in the same coffee shop where a table of old men are saying climate change is overrated.

> #notyouus I guess.

The intergenerational discounting this user reports contravenes a commitment to the idea that one's behaviour should be oriented toward a common good, 'not you, us', even or especially when you do not stand to benefit most or at all. Intergenerational discounting expresses and consolidates sentiments of despair, victimization and resentment in the

face of immense threats, normatively licensing a withdrawal from intergenerational efforts to mitigate those threats.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the appearance of generational grievance in how the conditions associated with the pandemic and climate change are narrativized. Twitter data provided a strategic window into this, as they allow one to witness the comparisons and connections users were drawing upon to make sense of the pandemic as it began to unfold in real time against the backdrop of climate change. Generational grievance emerged inductively as one significant theme in the definitional process taking place. Its emergence in the more particular narrative form of 'intergenerational discounting' reveals that the two crises are not only often explained in relation to generational experiences, as recent scholarship in the sociology of generations might predict; they are also morally connected to each other, through the intergenerational discounting that links those experiences. As scholarship in social problems theory invites us to reflect upon, such moral linkages are important for the ways that they can license hostile or neglectful responses, while obscuring meaningful intersectional disadvantages that profoundly shape the experiences and fates of people as they confront both crises. Because of the nature of the platform, this moral linkage is not established based on detailed argumentation and evidence. Indeed, many of the elisions and simplifications here would not stand up to empirical scrutiny. But the data nevertheless capture a kind of atmosphere of sentiment, where the events and conditions associated with the pandemic and climate change enter into ongoing symbolic struggles over the generations themselves: who they are, what they are or should be responsible for, and what they owe each other. Those symbolic struggles give expression to material conditions of insecurity: for younger generations, indebtedness, precarious employment and high housing costs, and for everyone, declining social provision at the behest of neoliberal curtailments of the welfare state, as well as an intensifying climate crisis (Martin & Roberts, 2021).

As scholarship on generationalism has argued, 'generation' should not be deployed only as a substantialist category of empirical analysis that the researcher defines and operationalizes; it is also a category of practice, often a murky one, that is made and remade through plural and often contentious scientific and public discourses. As Bristow (2019) notes, 'Talking about generations means talking about how we make sense of the world: the passing of time, the events that we experience, what we learn from our elders and what we pass on to our children' (p. 70). Future research can continue to follow the construction of generational grievances within and beyond Twitter and other online spaces, as they work to inform collective understandings of the nature of social problems and what should be done about them.

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Notes

1. People 'select in' to Twitter. If we look at what is known about users more generally, in the United States, users tend to be younger and are more likely to be Democrats than the general public, with roughly even numbers of men and women (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019); worldwide, more than 80% of Twitter's global population is under 50 years old and its largest demographic is men between the ages of 25 and 34 years old, at 19% of users (Kemp, 2020).
2. TweetSets uses the POST statuses/filter method of the Twitter Stream API, with the track parameters: #Coronavirus, #Coronaoutbreak, #COVID19. For the time period examined here, the TweetSets database includes 12,006,757 tweets. I collected and rehydrated (using Python Hydrator) tweet IDs for all original (81% of the dataset) and reply (19% of the dataset) tweets that included 'climate' or 'climate change'. This yielded data on 9362 tweets: the tweet text itself along with some user and tweet data (e.g. Twitter handle, number of followers, time of tweet and so forth).
3. The first round of coding revealed that 2537 tweets were not substantively relevant to the analysis. These were tweets that: (a) included no substantive text that could be coded thematically (e.g. they were just a series of mentions or hashtags); (b) were not, in fact, in English; or (c) used 'climate' in a different sense (e.g. 'the current political climate').

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