Talking About Generations

5 questions to ask yourself

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5 questions to ask yourself

Generations are increasingly central to public discussions about future policy and social relationships, but the term is often deployed in narrow or confused ways. This can fuel division between age groups rather than producing shared understanding or solidarity. Imprecise use of the concept also deflects attention from other pressing areas of societal tension. Generation is a useful and accessible term that engages people from a wide range of fields, but it should be used carefully.

The Generations Network was established in January 2020, with support from the Wellcome Trust, to bring different academic disciplines and policy-facing organisations into a discussion about how the concept of generation should be defined, and how it can be better used.

We suggest, as a starting point, that those working with the concept of generation ask themselves these 5 questions:

1. *What* are you talking about?
2. *Who* are you talking about?
3. *Where* are you talking about?
4. *Why* are you talking about them?
5. Who are you talking *to*?

1. *What* are you talking about?

'Generation' has two main meanings:
- Family generations (such as parents, children, grandchildren)
- Social or historical generations (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and so on).

We can think of these as 'vertical' and 'lateral': the familial meaning indicates the passing of time, whereas the social meaning focuses on contemporaries. 'Vertical' relationships between the generations do not exist only in families, but permeate work and community life, bringing members of different generations in constant contact with each other and minimising conflict.

The term is also often used to mean several other things:
- Age group or cohort (e.g. 60-65 year olds, Class of 1966)
- Life stage ('older' and 'younger' people)
- An indefinite period of time (e.g. a 'once in a generation vote').

These definitions are often mixed up or used interchangeably, leading to confusion and antagonism. If you actually mean age group, cohort or life stage, consider using those terms instead. Marketing categories or generational 'labels' often have little correlation with social identities; these should be scrutinised for accuracy and used with care.

2. *Who* are you talking about?

Avoid generalizing about any generation's experience. The current discourse surrounding terms like 'Boomer', 'Karen' or 'Millennial' are often based on white and middle-class stereotypes, but our populations are much more diverse.

Generations are made up of individuals, with diverse outlooks and life experiences: lumping these together wipes out individual differences, and can foster resentment within and between social groups. We should acknowledge diversity within generations, also known as intra-generational differences.

Generational categories intersect with other categories of identity. Minority groups, including migrants and LGBTQI+, may have different generational markers, speaking to the intersection of chronology and marginalised experience. Sensitivity to these differences avoids presenting generations as homogenous, and encourages a wider understanding of experience.

3. *Where* are you talking about?

Historical and demographic differences mean that no single schema can be applied globally.

Generations form through historical events and upheavals (e.g. the Spanish Civil War in 1930s Spain; the Windrush migration in late-1940s Britain), that are often distinct to particular national contexts.

Claims about the size, or the experience, of birth cohorts in one society should not be mapped on to another society without attention to the differences.

4. *Why* are you talking about them?

Generations are an important consideration for some policy discussions and decisions, but not for all of them.

'Generational divisions' should not be emphasised to evade discussions of other social divisions. Sometimes what appear to be generational differences are in fact a result of something else such as deprivation, class, gender, or ethnicity.

Politicized uses of 'generation' tend to co-opt young people into particular stances, by blaming 'older voters' for democratic choices or assuming a single 'voice of youth'. Generational language such as 'Millennial vs. Boomer' is often applied as a proxy for the binary categories of 'young vs. old'. Precise generational language and analysis will allow us to go beyond simplistic and potentially divisive dichotomies.

5. Who are you talking *to*?

Generational analysis is important because it helps us identify differences between groups. However, differences should not be emphasised at the expense of what people have in common. Where there are differences, this does not automatically need to produce antagonism - differences in experience, skills, outlook and resources can be complementary and produce solidarity. Generations do not exist in *isolation but* are constantly interacting and interdependent via reciprocal relationships of support.

Too much policy discussion currently focuses exclusively on intergenerational asset transfer or 'justice' – using a deficit model – rather than what generations can gain from each other. Supporting intergenerational cooperation and solidarity requires bringing different generational groupings into a conversation about social problems and solutions – with policymakers, and with each other.

Avoiding the pitfalls of generation talk: 3 suggestions

1. **Think twice before using the term 'generations'. Would life stage, age group or cohort be more accurate?**

    If you are talking about a specific audience (such as '60 to 65-year olds' or 'over-80s in care homes'), name them upfront, and don't hide behind generational labels.

2. **Design policy consultations where possible to include all generations, and in mixed-age rather than age- segregated formats.**

    Include all of the 4-5 generations currently living. This means not focusing only on the 'book-end generations' (youngest and oldest), but offering opportunities for adjacent and intermediate generations to communicate and collaborate.

3. **Recognise that the pandemic has affected <u>every</u> generation in varying but significant ways.**

    The Covid-19 pandemic has seen damaging generational stereotypes and polarising claims reignite in public discourse. We should be hesitant about predicting outcomes for the so-called 'Covid generation' of young people, since the future is not pre-determined. We can acknowledge that the pandemic has affected the young and old differently, without endorsing the divisive view that one age group has been favoured or harmed at the expense of the other; and we should recognise where the pandemic has fostered intergenerational solidarity and collaboration, as well as tensions.