9 The Baby-boomer generation

Another breed of elderly people?

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Introduction

Baby boomers, born in the years after World War II, are now entering retirement in large numbers. From being contributors to society, they are now becoming consumers of pensions and services. Because of their size in numbers, it has long been recognized that aging boomers will pose major challenges for Western welfare states. Adding fuel to these concerns is the anticipation that boomers will have higher demands and expectations than previous generations of older adults. This anticipation is underpinned by negative images of boomers, mostly promoted through popular media, of a generation, molded by the cultural and social change in the 1960s and 1970s, used to a relatively affluent and hedonistic lifestyle, and to expect control and a strong voice in society (Bristow 2015). Concomitantly, the media has often portrayed the boomers as a rather egoistic, self-indulgent, and careless group (e.g. Bristow 2015, Jönsson & Jönson 2015). Although considerable scientific attention has been paid to examine social and cultural constructions of typical Baby-boomer characteristics, little empirical evidence has shed light on the validity of the traits ascribed to the boomers.

In this chapter, we explore the ways and extent to which boomers deviate from other generations. We first discuss boomers as a generation and present some of the literature about perceptions of boomers. Next, based on data from the Norwegian study of life-course, aging, and generation (NorLAG), we explore differences in values and expectations between ageing boomers and previous generations of the elderly: Do the boomers hold higher control beliefs and more self-centered and hedonistic values? Are the differences of a magnitude that indicates a generational shift? The negative boomer narratives mostly come from young generations, implying a downward generational value gap. We thus also compare the values and expectations of the boomers with those of younger generations.

Baby boomers as a generation

The term “Baby boomers” refers to the post-World War II birth boom in many Western countries and is thus a cohort-based concept of generations. Over time the boomers have, however, come to be associated with their distinctive formative

experiences in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which in many ways set them apart from previous generations (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). At that time many Western countries experienced dramatic social and cultural changes “crystallized by the events of 1968, from the ‘summer of love’ to student rebellion to political crisis and military defeat” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007:16). Key elements of these changes include expanded consumption, leisure, and entertainment, increased educational and occupational opportunities for women. This all took place in a period of economic growth and urbanization, and was accompanied by changes in social attitudes and life styles and opposition to authorities and traditional norms regarding, e.g. gender roles, sexual relations, abortion, parenting, clothing, drugs, and, above all, the preceding generation. Choice, autonomy, hedonism, and self-expression were key values for the boomers (Phillipson et al. 2008). These historical experiences arguably had a lasting influence on their values, attitudes, and lifestyle, and explain why the boomers are often referred to as “the 60s generation” or the “68-ers”.

Hence, Baby boomers as a generation are more distinct than an age cohort and can, in line with Mannheim’s theory (1952), be conceptualized as a *social generation*. According to Mannheim, a generation is an age cohort that has experienced some significant social or historical events during their formative years. These shared experiences have, in turn, created a common set of behaviors, feelings, and thoughts that facilitate a shared generational consciousness. A generational consciousness is more likely to arise during times of social turbulence and rapid cultural changes. Thus, not every age cohort develops a distinct consciousness. Nor do individuals within the same generation view events and respond to historical situations in the same way, because a generation is also internally stratified (e.g. by class, ethnicity, and location). Consequently, a generation will be differently influenced by certain social and historical events and stratified by what Mannheim terms “generational units”. Following Mannheim, the boomers is a “true” generation in sociological terms. Although only a minority of boomers actively participated in movements and activities at the time, most of them were influenced by the cultural and social changes, but from different locations and in different ways.

Beyond the social and cultural influences, the boomers’ worldview and values are likely also influenced by their distinct socioeconomic resources compared to earlier generations. As a group, boomers have been privileged since they were born and raised through an optimistic period with steadily increasing wealth and consumption and an expanding welfare state, improved social security and health services, universally available higher education, and improved housing conditions. As older adults, they are still privileged with higher pensions and wealth than previous generations and can expect to live in better health and longer than their parents.

Two generational shifts, in the “Mannheimian” sense, have taken place in Europe during the 20th century: in the 1920s and 1970s (Higgs & Gilleard, 2010). Roberts (2012), among others, holds that after the boomers there has been no true generational shifts; the boomers’ way of life has simply been continued, or even amplified, in new age groups. However, continuity is also always evident through

pronounced generational shifts, as emphasized in theories of generations. Thus, despite marked generational differences in experiences, differences in values and worldview can be exaggerated in public debates.

Images of the Baby boomers

Changed images

The Baby boomers' demographic, historical, socioeconomic, and cultural characteristics have given rise to generalized images of them. Bristow (2015:86) identifies five key attributes in current cultural scripts of the boomers: they have been *lucky*, as elderly they are *affluent*, and they are *large in numbers*. In addition, they are portrayed as *selfish* and *reckless*. The first three are facts, while the portrayal of boomers as selfish and reckless are assumptions, open to question and to be explored empirically in this chapter.

As a generation, boomers may have received more media attention than any other generation. However, their portrayals have changed during their lifetime. In their youth, student protest movements and counterculture constituted the basis. Only a minority, mostly students from privileged social backgrounds, actively participated, and they attracted much attention from scholars and journalists (Bristow, 2015). Although their image as a generation was not yet formed, the basis for the generation of 68ers or boomers was founded. Through their early and middle adulthood, their images were mostly positive and with some degree of admiration. They were in many ways regarded as pioneers and mavericks, challenging authorities and traditions, transforming lifestyles, pushing a progressive political agenda, and advocating equality, tolerance, and liberal values (Hughes & O'Rand, 2004; Phillipson et.al. 2008).

After the turn of the millennium, however, against a backdrop of growing political concerns caused by population aging and its associated cost for the welfare state, more negative connotations prevailed. Knowledge about these negative images comes mainly from scholarly reviews of popular media, journalistic articles, and political speeches and commentaries. Collectively, these reviews describe growing sentiments toward the boomers as being selfish and reckless. The media stereotyping are generalizations often ignoring the vast heterogeneity among boomers. Media does, however, both reflect and shape public view, and the negative images may contribute to create tensions between generations.

The boomers as selfish and reckless

Phillipson et al. (2008) explored images of the boomers in different written sources and found that an important part of the material dealt with the long-term damage caused by the "boomer-burden" on the sustainability of the welfare state. Boomers thus were identified as a "problem group", or, as others have described them, a "problem generation" (Leach et al 2013) that "took their children's future" (Willett, 2010; 2019). Negative images of the boomers as selfish and reckless thus emerged, and one of the main problems behind these images and

the “boomer blaming” (Bristow 2015) was their high level of consumption, or “overconsumption”.

Literature consistently note the boomers’ key role in the rise of modern consumerism, with lifestyles and identities linked to freedom to spend, satisfy wants and needs, and to make personal choices (Biggs et.al. 2007). The boomers’ “reckless consumption” is also an argument used by younger people in the debate about climate changes; they are held responsible for increasing climate crisis and blamed for unwillingness to take the consequences (e.g. by the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg).

Beyond their high consumption, the key point may be their ways of spending more than the level (Phillipson et al, 2008). While their parents emphasized consumption within the “nuclear family”, the boomers prioritized more individualized consumption. This divide may be exaggerated, however, as the boomers were also influenced by their parents’ attitudes to consumption. Leach et al. (2013) find that in many respect boomers see themselves as a “bridging” generation, neither “frugal” as their parents nor “wasteful” as their children.

Bristow’s (2015, 2016, 2020) exhaustive research on images of boomers in UK media draws attention to the moral critique of the generation and the emotional quality that it lends to the discourse of generational fairness: boomers are portrayed as problematic, not only because of their advantages and behavior, but also because of their character (Bristow 2020). She finds that attitudes recently have become more hostile, notably after the Brexit election, findings summarized in her article “The making of ‘Boomergeddon’: the construction of the Baby-boomer generation as a social problem in Britain” (Bristow 2016). Boomergeddon “expresses a view of boomers as a large and ageing cohort, and a generation associated with selfish, hedonistic, reckless behavior” (op.cit.:576). She also points out emerging paradoxes which demonstrate growing intergenerational conflict. One is the “paradox of longevity”; the fact that the healthy, wealthy, and presumably demanding boomers live longer and thus will increase public expenditure even more. The other is the “paradox of prosperity”, which refers to boomers as hedonistic and anti-conventional as a result of their previous prosperity and therefore will expect more and thereby cause additional economic problems for society. The recent humorous, but nevertheless mean, term “Boomer Remover” as another name for COVID-19 (Wikionary) is yet another sign of this tension.

Such images emerge also in the scarce Scandinavian literature. For example, a Swedish study of media presentations finds that boomers were predicted to become a “a new breed” of care users, by projecting typical characteristics bestowed to boomers into their future (Jönson & Jönsson 2015). Although Swedish media presentations vary, boomers were broadly portrayed as privileged and spoiled, demanding and greedy, and self-aware and self-centered. Above all, they are used to getting their own way and possess the capacity to change situations to their best. As a generation they have betrayed their former radical ideas, they are numerous and influential, have dominated the labor market, and blocked opportunities for younger generations. As retirees they will put pressure on the economy. Similarly, a Finnish study notes that after the turn of the millennium,

“boomers have been attacked by members of the younger cohorts, who claim that they are a ‘greedy generation’ which only thinks of itself in spite of claiming solidarity with those in a less fortunate position” (Karisto 2007: 101). In Norway as well, although we lack systematic studies of boomer images, the media repeatedly portrays, often subtly, boomers as a different kind of people, as recently in a Norwegian newspaper: “The young secure the future – the old secure themselves” (Hauk, Klassekampen 2020.09.29).

In sum, while negative images of the boomers’ behavior and character seem quite pervasive in many Western countries (Phillipson, 2007; Bristow, 2020), little is known about their prevalence and distribution.

The boomers as agentic and expecting influence and control

The negative image of Baby boomers summarized above primarily addresses their behavior and values – their moral. However, when they are suspected of “engineering their own luck” (White 2013), they are not only assumed to have selfish and hedonistic values that direct their priorities, they are also assumed to have the power and resources to do so. The sheer number of “grey voters” is important, and an aspect that is emphasized in discussions of generational (un)fairness (e.g. Vanhuysse & Tremmel, 2018). Another aspect, in line with the moral critique of boomers, is more psychological and refers to their purported expectations and insistence of being in control, to have it their own way. In order to act selfish and reckless, the boomers must be able to influence and exert control. While values shape aims and direct behavior, control beliefs give force or strength to act in line with the values. The assumption that boomers hold high-control expectations is mostly implicit in the portrayal of boomers as a “greedy generation”. High-control beliefs, or agency, are, however, essential for acting according to individualistic values and thus a vital, yet often unspoken, part of the boomer image.

To exert influence, individuals must believe that they possess the capacity to influence, and that the environment is somehow controllable. These are two essential parts of control beliefs (Bandura 1977). Although distinct from personality traits, both values (e.g. Sagiv et al. 2017) and control beliefs (Lachman et.al. 2011) are found to be rather enduring qualities, assumed to develop in youth and early adulthood. The assumption that boomers hold high control or agency beliefs aligns with the assumption that their formative years are essential for how they are as older adults. Of key relevance here is the hopeful and prosperous era of the 1960s, and increased opportunities for education, women’s labor force participation, fertility control, political activism, and civil rights – all of which point to increased expectations to have an impact on the world. These movements would have affected individuals whether they took part in them or not.

In the literature, control beliefs, or expectations, are often termed “sense of control”. Although different terms are used, all refer to individuals’ belief and expectation that their actions can affect their world (Mirowsky & Ross, 1998). Sense of control is a vital psychological resource, repeatedly found to predict positive outcomes such as psychological wellbeing, physical health, and mortality

(for reviews, see Gerstorf et al., 2019, Slagsvold & Sørensen, 2013). These positive outcomes are primarily related to the *beliefs* about being able to control, regardless of whether these beliefs are correct or not (Skinner 1996). Part of the explanation is that positive control beliefs increase the likelihood that individuals will *try* to exert influence. Control beliefs are unevenly distributed, found to be positively associated with education, to be higher among men than women (Ross & Mirowsky, 2002), and to decrease with age as resources and health deteriorate (Slagsvold & Sørensen 2013). Theories of sense of control are elaborate and studies extensive (e.g. Skinner, 1996; Lachman et.al. 2011). Here we are interested in sense of control in a rather crude way; as an indicator of generational differences in expectations of influence and control.

Research questions: how different are the Baby boomers?

Using the large international value surveys (European Values Study and World Values Survey), numerous studies on changes and differences in values have been published. We have, however, not found empirical studies which compare value orientations across different historical generations when they were at the same age, as we do here.

An important part of the boomer narratives is that their typical characteristics are attributed to formative experiences and that a considerable generational change in values and ways of life took place between the pre-war generation and boomers.

We thus ask: *Do values and control beliefs differ between aging boomers and the pre-war generations when they were at the same age?*

The boomers' educational level is higher than in previous generations, especially among women, and education is positively associated with more liberal values (Schwarz 2007, Dunn, 2011) and higher sense of control (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007; Slagsvold & Sørensen, 2013). To explain the "boomer character" it is thus important to take the formative effect that education may have into consideration.

We thus ask: *Do education explain some of the differences between Baby boomers and previous generations regarding values and expectations of control?*

The above-mentioned "boomer blaming", primarily voiced by younger people, stems from negative perceptions of the boomers' selfish motivations, priorities, and behavior. But how different are the boomers compared to younger generations in terms of values and control expectations? Cross-sectional studies consistently find that younger age cohorts rate individualistic values somewhat higher and traditional values somewhat lower than older generations (e.g. Borg et al., 2017, Fung et.al. 2016). Therefore, we will concentrate on three values posited to be especially characteristic for boomers, namely, hedonism, lack of benevolence, and universalism: boomers are assumed to rate hedonism higher and benevolence and universalism lower than younger generations.

We thus ask: *Do we find differences between Baby boomers and later generations in hedonism, benevolence, and universalism, and in expectations of control?*

Data and measurements

Data come from the Norwegian study of life-course, aging, and generation (NorLAG; doi:10.18712/norlag3_1) (Slagsvold et al., 2012, Veenstra et al., 2021). NorLAG is a panel survey with data from a population-based sample drawn from the non-institutionalized population. Data were collected in 2002–2003 with a sample aged 40–80 (t1); in 2007 with a sample aged 18–80 (t2); and 2017 with a sample aged 50–90 (t3). Statistics Norway collected data via telephone interviews, postal (t1 and t2) or web-based (t3) questionnaire, and register information (e.g. education and marital status). In the analyses we include respondents with information from both telephone interview and postal questionnaire. The response rate in the three consecutive waves are 67, 61, and 68%, and respectively 75, 77, and 73% of respondents (who took part in the telephone interview) returned the self-completion questionnaire (Veenstra et al., 2021).

We define Baby boomers as those born between 1945 and 1955, aged 62–72 in 2017 (t3). The literature sometimes defines Baby boomers as those born between 1945 and 1964 and distinguish between early and late boomers (e.g. Hughes & O’Rand 2004). Here we concentrate on early boomers. The pre-war generation is defined as those born between 1930 and 1940.

Table 9.1 shows the sample’s cross-generational differences in gender and educational level. Among the pre-war generation (born 1939–1940) and early boomers (born 1945–1955), 50% of the sample is women, whereas women are somewhat overrepresented in the younger subsample. The educational level is higher for each generation. In the pre-war generation, 37% have more than 12 years of education, compared to 62% among the early boomers, 79% among the late boomers (born 1959–1966), and 85% in generation X (born 1967–1977), and Millennials (born 1978–1988). In analyses we use information about early boomers both from 2017 and 2007, and 2007 data are specified in parenthesis.

Table 9.1 Educational level and gender across the sample of generations (%)

	<i>Silent/ Pre-war generation 1930–1940</i>	<i>Early boomers 1945–1955</i>	<i>Late boomers 1956–1966</i>	<i>Generation X 1967–1977</i>	<i>Millennial generation 1978–1988</i>
Year of data collection	2002	2017 (2007)	2007	2007	2007
Women	49.8	50.2 (52.4)	56.1	56.5	58.4
Education, years of schooling					
<10	28.7	11.7 (13.7)	17.2	8.0	14.3
11–12	34.1	26.7 (28.3)	11.6	6.6	0
13–14	14.6	22.6 (23.1)	33.6	32.0	47.1
14–17	16.3	29.6 (27.4)	28.8	38.9	33.3
18+	6.3	9.3 (7.5)	8.9	14.5	5.3
N	1017	1714 (2354)	2313	2283	1519

Generational terms from “Generational names in the United States” provided by Population Reference Bureau.

Dependent variables

Values are measured by a slightly modified version of the “Portrait Value Questionnaire” (Schwartz, 2007), which comprises 21 questions that tap 10 basic values: stimulation, self-direction, tradition, conformity, security, achievement, power, universalism, benevolence, and hedonism. These are combined to represent more general value dimensions; “openness to change vs conservatism”, and “self-enhancement vs self-transcendence”, which again can be arranged along the dimension “individualism vs collectivism”. The respondents are presented with descriptions of a person and asked how much they resemble this person on a six-point scale from “very much like me” to “not like me at all”. Examples are (“It is important for this person”): “to help people around him/her and to care for their wellbeing”; “to have fun”; “to be humble and modest and not to draw attention to him-/herself”. The information is collected in the postal questionnaire. Value scores range from 1 to 6 (high degree).

In the analyses of generational differences, we will comment on all value orientations, but concentrate on hedonism and self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence) because having or not having these values is part of the picture drawn of boomers.

Expectations of control is measured with the Personal Mastery Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). It comprises seven questions that on a 5-point Likert scale measures agreement to statements such as “what happens to me in the future mostly depends on me”, “there is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life”, and “I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do”. Value scores range from 7 to 35 (high sense of control).

Control variables

In the analyses we control for *gender*, as the literature finds gender differences in some values (Lyons et al., 2005; Schwartz 2007). One might also expect that cultural and social changes in their youth affected women’s sense of control more than men’s, possibly also their values, as increased gender equality was an important issue in the boomers’ youth. We also control for *education*, as education levels are higher among boomers than previous generations and it is known to influence values in a more liberal direction. Research also consistently find a strong and positive association between educational level and sense of control. Educational level is measured in five categories corresponding to years of schooling: <10, 11–12, 13–14, 14–17, and 18+.

Analyses

To compare similar age groups (ages 62–72) in analyses of differences between Baby boomers and the pre-war generation, we use data of boomers collected in

2017 (t3) and data from the pre-war generation collected in 2002 (t1). When comparing boomers and younger generations, we use data from 2007 (t2), because this is the only wave that comprises younger adults (age 18+). Boomers in these analyses are aged 52–62.

We use analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the significance of differences across age cohort groups. We use χ^2 tests to compare the proportions, and Pearson correlations to assess intercorrelations between continuous variables. All multi-variate analyses use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. We used analyses of covariance (procedure General Linear Model in SPSS) to estimate adjusted mean levels of values and control beliefs by age groups.

Results

Comparing pre-war generation and Baby boomers: do we find signs of a generational shift in values?

In Figure 9.1, we show differences in the five basic individualistic values: hedonism (pleasure, enjoy life, self-indulgence), power (authority, wealth, preserving a public image), achievement (being successful, capable, ambitious, influential), stimulation (a varied and exciting life), and self-direction (freedom, being independent, choosing own goals).

Baby boomers rate all individualistic values higher than the pre-war generation, and the largest difference is observed for hedonism.

Boomers are also blamed for being selfish and greedy, which can be illustrated by (not holding) collectivistic values (Figure 9.2). Two of the collectivistic values

Figure 9.1 Individualistic values. Mean score in the ages 62–72. Baby boomers (measured in 2017) and pre-war generation (measured in 2002). *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 9.2 Collectivistic values. Mean score in the ages 62–72. Baby boomers (measured in 2017) and pre-war generation (measured in 2002). *** $p < 0.001$

Table 9.2 Regression of sense of control, effect of belonging to Baby boomer vs pre-war generation, gender, and education. Partial eta squared, *** $p < .001$

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
Baby boomer generation (vs pre-war generation)	0.29***	0.25***
Gender		0.01***
Education (1–5)		0.02***
Adjusted R ²	0.29	0.31

may be regarded as the opposite of selfishness and greediness: benevolence (being helpful, honest, forgiving, loyal, responsible) and universalism (valuing broad-mindedness, social justice, equality, unity with the nature).

Benevolence and universalism are rated somewhat higher by the Baby boomers than the pre-war generation, in other words, boomers do not seem to hold more selfish values than the pre-war generation when they were at the same age (Table 9.2). However, the pre-war generation values tradition more than the boomers (being humble, accepting their portion in life, devout, moderate, having respect for tradition). This is only one of the collectivistic values that the pre-war generation rates higher than the boomers.

We also see that both generations rate collectivistic values higher than individualistic values; whereas all five collectivistic values on average are rated above 4

by both generations (Figure 9.2), of the individualistic values this is the case only for the self-direction value (Figure 9.1).

Are value differences across generations attributable to educational differences? When we take education into consideration, we find that among the individualistic values only hedonism remains statistically significant (ancillary analyses, not shown). In fact, when controlling for education, the higher emphasis on hedonism among Baby boomers versus the older generation increases somewhat, as education is negatively related to hedonism and hedonism is rated higher by the boomer generation. As for collectivistic values, we find that boomers rate only benevolence and universalism higher also when we control for education and gender (not shown).

To briefly comment on the influence of education and gender (not shown), we find that education bears significant positive associations to all individualistic values and negative associations to three collectivistic values beyond the effect of generation. Education is unrelated to benevolence and universalism. Furthermore, we find that men rate individualistic values somewhat higher than women, except hedonism, which men and women rate equally high. Women rate collectivistic values somewhat higher, except conformity, where there is no gender difference. Gender differences are slightly larger among the pre-war generation compared to the boomers. We also find significant interaction effects between generation and education for three collectivistic values; security, tradition, and conformity (which add up to what Schwartz (2007) calls “conservation”). The general notion that the higher educated are less collectivistic is stronger in the pre-war generation than among the boomers.

Comparing pre-war generation and Baby boomers: do we find signs of a generational shift in sense of control

Baby boomers report a considerably higher sense of control (mean 26.5) than the pre-war generation (mean 20.7) (when they were at the same age). This difference could, because of the relationship between education and sense of control (e.g. Mirowsky and Ross 2007), be explained by generational differences in educational level. This is, however, not the case, as sense of control is only slightly reduced when we control for education and gender. Gender and education are related to sense of control but do only marginally reduce the effect of generational affiliation Table 9.2.

Partial eta squared is more than ten times higher for generational affiliation (0.25) than for education (0.02) and gender (0.01), meaning that which generation you belong to means a lot more for the level of sense of control than do education and gender.

Comparing Baby boomers and younger generations: how different are they with regard to values?

We find a steady increase in individualist value orientation from older (the Baby boomers) to younger generations (Figure 9.3), in line with previous studies. The decrease in collectivistic values is quite modest, however (Figure 9.4).

Figure 9.3 Mean levels of individualistic values across four generations. Data from 2007.

Figure 9.4 Mean levels of collectivistic values across four generations. Data from 2007.

As explained, we are primarily interested in generational differences in hedonism, benevolence, and universalism, indicative of traits that the Baby boomers are assumed to have in excess: self-indulgence and egocentrism. While the Baby boomers value hedonism somewhat higher than the pre-war generation (see Figure 9.1), the succeeding generations value hedonism even higher, and significantly ($p < 0.001$) more so for each generation (Figure 9.3).

Similarly, we find no indication that Baby boomers are less benevolent or less universalistic-oriented than younger-age cohorts (Figure 9.4). The Baby boomers are as benevolent as the generations born during 1956–1977, but somewhat less ($p < 0.001$) than the youngest generation, aged 19–29 at the time of data collection.

Differences between generations in hedonism, benevolence, and universalism remain when we control for education and gender (not shown). The effects of education come above the effects of generation, with the same tendencies as we found for the pre-war generation and Baby boomers; gender differences are small for hedonism while women value benevolence and universalism higher. Education is negatively associated with hedonism, while educational differences in benevolence and universalism is only marginal.

Comparing Baby boomers and younger generations: how different are they with regard to sense of control?

Sense of control is considerably higher among Baby boomers than among the pre-war generation (Table 9.2). Compared to younger generations however, the Baby boomers report somewhat lower control expectations (Figure 9.5), also when we adjust for education and gender. Education and gender are significantly related to sense of control beyond the effect of generational affiliation.

Summary and discussion

Since the turn of the century, aging Baby boomers have increasingly been viewed as a “problem group” for the welfare state, and their characters have often been portrayed in negative terms in media and everyday language. Shaped by their formative experiences, boomers are often depicted as hedonistic and selfish, and

Figure 9.5 Sense of control (range 7–35). Unadjusted and adjusted mean levels across four generations.

to enter old age with higher levels of consumption and demands on the welfare state than previous generations. Researchers who have studied images of boomers have mostly interpreted them as social constructions shaped by political events and economic setbacks, and concomitant worries for the future (Phillipson 2008, White 2013, Bristow, 2015). However, despite pervasive scholarly and lay person interests in boomers' moral character, their values and attitudes have been subject to little empirical study.

Using data from NorLAG we have tried to shed light on the validity of the negative assumptions about boomers by comparing values and control beliefs across generations. We have concentrated on three values of key relevance. The first is hedonism, which taps individual emphasis on enjoyment of life, pleasure, and self-indulgence. The two other values are benevolence (being helpful, honest, forgiving, loyal, responsible) and universalism (valuing broadmindedness, social justice, equality, unity with the nature), which is the exact opposite of being selfish, reckless, and greedy.

Our first aim was to compare boomers (in 2017) with the pre-war generation (in 2002), when both cohorts were aged 62–72, and assess generational differences in values and control beliefs. Consistent with popular beliefs, boomers rate traditional values somewhat lower and individualistic values higher, with the largest difference observed for hedonism. However, the image of boomers as less benevolent and universalistic is not confirmed: in fact, boomers hold these values *higher* than the preceding generation. These unconditional (bivariate) comparisons are highly relevant as impressions of different generations are likely formed based on an overall impression, without factoring in compositional features. However, education is perhaps the feature that varies the most between the generations and that also relate to values and control beliefs. When we control for education, the only generational differences that remain significant are for hedonism, benevolence, and universalism, which means that boomers' greater individualism likely stems from the formative influence of a higher educational level.

Higher hedonism corresponds with popular narratives and notions that aging boomers have kept the lifestyle and mentality acquired in their liberated youth – a taste for pleasure and self-indulgence. Other notions, however, that boomers are selfish, reckless, and greedy are not supported, as boomers value benevolence and universalism somewhat higher than the pre-war generation. Being children of the 60s, this finding is perhaps not surprising, quite the contrary. Civil rights, anti-war, and equality were among the central values in the boomers' youth, when they assumedly acquired their values. That said, while the differences for hedonism are quite large, the differences for benevolence and universalism are quite modest, albeit statistically significant.

The most notable observed difference is for sense of control and indicates a real change in orientation, in line with Mannheim's notion of generational shifts. Having high control beliefs is obviously related to efforts to realize aims and values. People may, for example, not act on hedonistic values unless they believe they have the capacity to influence their life, or that it indeed is influenceable.

Hence, the crucial difference between the pre-war and boomer generations may be control beliefs more than values. Even with similar rating of hedonism or other values, boomers are more likely to act on them. Similarly, although individualistic values such as those for power (authority, wealth, preserving a public image), achievement (being successful, capable, ambitious, influential), stimulation (a varied and exciting life), and self-direction (freedom, being independent, choosing own goals) differ only moderately between the generations, the boomers' high control beliefs may be critical for their realization. If so, the image of boomers as clearly different from the generations before them may hold more truth than differences in values alone indicate.

The negative images of aging boomers seem especially pervasive among younger generations, implying that they perceive themselves to be less hedonistic, selfish, and reckless than boomers. These notions are not supported by our data, however. On the contrary, compared with the younger generations, boomers have lower controls beliefs, value hedonism less, and value benevolence and universalism equally high. As such, the younger is more "boomer-like" than the boomers themselves.

That aging boomers seem more individualistic and agentic than the older generation but less so than younger generations supports previous studies showing boomers to be a "bridging" (Leach et al. 2013) or "crossroad" (Karisto 2007) generation that combines attributes (attitudes, lifestyle, etc.) from both former and later generations.

Why then are Baby boomers blamed for having these negative characteristics? One reason may be a misplaced causal attribution of unequal opportunities and resources between generations, as many researchers on boomer images have pointed to (e.g. Phillipson et al., 2008; Bristow 2015). The argument is that younger generations are blaming their relatively difficult situation and uncertain future (e.g. regarding economic conditions, housing costs, work opportunities, and climate change) on the boomers' historically selfish and reckless priorities, whereas the situation more reasonably stems from other sociopolitical events and developments. A different explanation is more psychological. We found the values of the pre-war generation to be more in line with a traditional image of old people: as having a humble and modest lifestyle, driven by duty more than pleasure and accepting one's portion in life. In this respect, the boomers violate the picture of being old; they resemble the younger generations more than the traditional elderly. As scholars have pointed out, the boomer generation in many ways rejects traditional approaches to ageing (Biggs et al., 2007; Marshall and Rahman, 2015). Their ideal of aging tends to be one of youthfulness and vitality: valuing not only activity but also realization of the self, not only health but also fitness, and not resignation but agency and handling new challenges (Marshall and Rahman 2015). We speculate that aging boomers' possible insistence on youthfulness and rejection of old age may trigger negative emotions and create or reinforce opinions of boomers' self-centeredness and irresponsibility, especially among the younger age groups. Boomers' rejection of being old may thus be one source underpinning boomer blaming. The images of generations of elderly, and

differences between them, are stereotyped and not representative, but all the same they may create strong emotions.

Seemingly, contrary to the boomer-blaming phenomenon, Norwegian studies indicate that younger generations are slightly more solidary with older generations than vice versa (Bay & West-Pedersen chapter 4; Daatland et al., 2009). One reason may be that Baby boomers are not perceived as truly belonging to the “elderly” or “old”. The boomer type of the elderly may instead stir some negative emotions, as indicated in a study which found that when elderly workers were labeled “Baby boomer”, they were viewed more negatively by management students than when they were labeled “older employee” (Cox et.al 2018). While the label “Baby boomer” may generate positive associations of youthfulness for the boomers themselves, the same label may trigger more negative associations for younger generations.

Intergeneration tensions and generationalism

To explain inequality and disagreements between the younger generations and the Baby boomers by prevailing characteristics and traits of their members is a kind of generationalism, i.e. a systematic appeal to the concept of generation in narrating social and political issues (Purhonen 2016). White (2013) holds that this kind of simplified and exaggerated view of generation as the cause of social and cultural problems seems to be in vogue and replaces critical explanations focusing on policy, class, or gender. The focus is, e.g., on the Baby-boomer generation instead of problems of economic inequality, access to higher education, pensions, housing, or climate changes. White (op. cit) also points to some aspects he sees as characteristic for today’s “generation-talk”, among others that it is strongly oriented to the future and has a sense of foreboding, which is yet to manifest. The young are the victims, the aged are the problem, and positive associations to the aged is punctured, e.g. that the boomers in their youth were campaigning for liberty and a better world.

There is a widespread scholarly concern, found in almost every article about images of boomers, that this kind of generationalism, negative imaging of boomers in the media and elsewhere, may contribute to tensions and conflicts between generations. It is thus essential to nuance or dispel the stereotypes to mitigate tensions, and here we have focused on parts of the boomer narrative. We find that although boomers differ from previous generations in hedonism and control beliefs, they are primarily like younger generations in these aspects.

Limitations

One potential caveat concerns the representativeness of Norwegian generations for those in other countries. During the last century, Norway transitioned from being among the poorer to become among the wealthiest and strongest welfare state in Europe. Norway was also a vanguard in terms of developments known as the “second demographic transition”, and rather early

adopted liberal attitudes to, e.g. authorities, gender equality, sexual relations, divorce, and child-rearing. That said, the focus here is on the boomers' values and control beliefs, and these were likely formed in their formative years. Because Norway was quite similar to other countries in terms of GDP and social and cultural developments in the 60s and 70s, Norwegian boomers are probably rather prototypical of the Western boomers. The younger generations, however, have had a more fortunate situation in Norway than in most other countries. Although Norway, as other countries, is challenged by an ageing population, the Norwegian economy has been strong and able to handle the economic challenges without serious austerity policy or cutbacks in welfare. These differences may have affected younger generations' values and control beliefs differently across countries, and if so, probably by reducing younger generations' control beliefs, but hardly to a level below the Baby boomers'. However, the conditions for tensions between boomers and younger generations over economic equity may be weaker in Norway, while questions concerning climate changes and measures to handle them is certainly emerging as a topic where generationalism seems to arise – the young are pictured as the victims of boomers' reckless and greedy consumption.

The striking divide in control beliefs between the pre-war generation and the boomers warrants consideration and could reflect methodological weaknesses. Time of data collection may matter, and the fact that we compare data on older adults collected in 2002 (pre-war generation) and 2017 (boomers). Although control beliefs are rather stable, they are also affected by new experiences and changing environment (or “Zeitgeist”). From 2002 to 2017, control beliefs may have increased in parallel in all age cohorts, as shown in NorLAG data from 2002 vs 2007 (Slagsvold & Sørensen 2013). This development does, however, not influence the fact that when the pre-war generation was aged 62–72, they differed markedly from boomers at the same age, especially regarding hedonism and control beliefs.

Another, and potentially more serious, caveat concerns the stronger selection in the 2017 vs the 2002 data. While the pre-war generation is part of a representative random sample from the first wave of data collection in 2002, the sample of boomers in 2017 are “stayers” who had participated in at least one previous wave. Attrition between waves is larger for lower educated, the aged, and women (Veenstra et al., 2021). Although we control for these variables, other variables with impact on control beliefs may also influence attrition, especially physical and mental health. We have thus in ancillary analyses (not shown) used physical and mental health as additional controls and find that although these factors have strong effects on both sense of control and hedonism (but not on other values) they only marginally change the effect of generational affiliation.

Conclusion

We rhetorically asked whether Baby boomers are “another breed of older people” – regarding values and control beliefs. When comparing the boomers to the

pre-war generation, the answer is “probably yes”. Our findings suggest a noticeable generational shift between the pre-war generation and boomers in control beliefs but also in hedonism. As values and control beliefs impact priorities and behavior, the boomers may be a different type of older adults than we are used to – more hedonistic, agentic, and possibly more demanding.

However, the boomers are probably much the same “breed of old people” which we will see when the next generations become old, as their values and control beliefs are similar. But times can change, often in unpredictable ways. COVID-19, which hits people 65+ the hardest, may reduce boomers’ control beliefs and change their ideas of aging and old age. Climate crisis may bring about fundamental changes in values and ways of life for young age cohorts in their formative years and create a new set of common behaviors, feelings, and thoughts, i.e. a shared generational consciousness based on basically other formative experiences – which can make them to a generation in Mannheim’s sense – that further on will stay with them in their old age.

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