

**Research Space**

Journal article

**Post-Brexit boomer blaming: The contradictions of generational grievance**

**Bristow, J.**

Bristow J. Post-Brexit Boomer blaming: The contradictions of generational grievance. *The Sociological Review*. January 2020. doi:10.1177/0038026119899882

## **Post-Brexit Boomer blaming: The contradictions of generational grievance**

Dr Jennie Bristow, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Canterbury Christ Church University

[jennie.bristow@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:jennie.bristow@canterbury.ac.uk)

Room Prs01, St Martin's Priory, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Rd, Canterbury  
CT1 1QU

### **Keywords**

Baby Boomer, Millennial, Brexit, EU, generation

**Funding statement:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### **Abstract**

Following the UK's 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union (EU), a narrative emerged positioning Baby Boomers as 'to blame' for the result, which drew largely on a pre-existing claim that this generation is responsible for a range of contemporary social problems. Using cultural script analyses of the 'Baby Boomer problem', this paper considers the development of this narrative and its implications for the sociology of knowledge. A study of newspaper articles published around the time of the EU Referendum finds that the Baby Boomer motif is employed as a metaphorical shorthand for a range of 'troubling conditions' (Mills 1970), including economic crises, cultural conflicts, and political divisions. The escalating rhetoric of 'Boomer-blaming' pursued by claimsmaking organisations has sought to consolidate and extend a sentiment of generational grievance, which informs wider claims about a political divide between old and young. One consequence has been the weaponisation of the concept of generation: a development that threatens to undermine the value of this concept as a way of understanding social and historical change.

## Introduction

Since the turn of the Millennium, claims regarding intergenerational (in)equity, (in)justice, and (un)fairness have gained prominence in political and media discourse. A previous study (Bristow 2015) explored the aetiology of these claims, finding them to be explicitly connected to wider anxieties about economic crises, public spending, and the welfare state, in the context of an ageing society. Furthermore, that study suggested that the construction of the Baby Boomer generation *specifically* as a social problem in Britain reflected implicit, existential anxieties about the social and cultural legacy of the Sixties.

More recent developments have revealed an escalation of claimsmaking activity with regard to the problem of 'intergenerational fairness', and a focus on some distinct areas of economic, cultural, and political life (Bristow 2019). These include, among other things, the cost of housing; the 'affordability' of pensions; political participation and representation; and Higher Education funding and levels of student debt. Generational claimsmaking has proceeded in a context of political crisis, precipitated by the 'Leave' vote in the 2016 Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU), and followed by tumultuous national elections in the USA and Continental Europe. In response to these events, it has been widely claimed that age, and/or generation, has become 'the new dividing line' in politics (Curtis 2017).

But what does it mean to talk about age – or generation – becoming 'a great fault line' (P. Moore 2016) in events such as the EU Referendum? In one respect, this claim could be seen as a simple reflection of polling data, which revealed a correlation between older age and voting Leave, and between younger age and voting Remain. For example, the polling organisation YouGov found that, of those who voted on 23 June 2016, 29% of 18-24-year-olds voted Leave, compared to 64% of over-65s. However, this consensus is complicated by the caveat that, among the majority of the voting population, the 'age divide' was rather less stark, with 46% of voters aged 25 to 49 voting Leave, and 40% of voters between the ages of 50 and 64 voting Remain. A correlation was also revealed between voting preferences and levels of educational qualification, and also between voting preferences and regional location (P. Moore 2016).

Given the divisive character of the EU Referendum overall, it might seem curious that the 'age divide' should emerge as a key concern for commentators. It is more curious still that the extremes of the 'age divide' between the oldest and youngest sections of the voting population were often presented in terms of a wider clash of generational interests: in particular, between the 'Baby Boomers' (born in the two decades following the end of the Second World War) and the 'Millennials' (born in the final two decades of the twentieth century). News reports proclaiming that 'Millennials

have slammed Baby Boomers for voting Britain out of the EU' (Matthews 2016) exemplify the tenor of this narrative. In this framing of the age divide as a *generational* divide, the votes of the entire Baby Boomer cohort – aged between around 51 and 70 at the time of the Referendum – were elided with those of the oldest voters (aged 65+), while the votes of the entire Millennial cohort – aged between around 16 and 35 at the time of the Referendum – were elided with those of the youngest, 18-24 category.

Based on an analysis of reports and commentaries in the UK national newspapers in the months immediately leading up to, and following, the EU Referendum, this paper investigates the characteristics of the 'generation divide' narrative surrounding this event. It finds that this was not merely a discussion of the 'facts' revealed by polling data, but a symbolic debate, in which economic and political conflicts are represented as a generational conflict. As such, post-Brexit Boomer blaming can be seen as a case, not so much of generations, but of *generationalism*: '[t]he systematic appeal to the concept of generation in narrating the social and political' (White 2013, p. 216; Wohl 1980).

In analysing the development of generationalist thinking following the Brexit vote, this paper considers the role of claimsmaking organisations and moral entrepreneurs in the construction of a cultural script that attributes the size, age, attitudes, or behaviour of the Baby Boomer generation to a range of 'troubling conditions' (Mills 1970) experienced in the present day. The construction of the 'Baby Boomer generation' as a social problem is intriguing, as it does not obviously relate to a particular form of 'deviant' behaviour (Becker 1997), or to a clearly defined group of 'folk devils' (Cohen 2011), but to a large and heterogeneous group of people born at around the same time. However, my analysis suggests that the existence of a cultural script positioning of the Boomers as a problematic person-type (Loseke 2003), based primarily on their generational location, allowed for the 'piggybacking' (Best 2017) of a subsequent claim that the Boomers were to blame for Brexit, by some who considered the Leave vote to be deviant behaviour.

Generationalism, here, is understood as a 'simplified and exaggerated view of generation' (Purhonen 2016, p. 96), which results in deterministic presentation of particular generations as the cause of (and/or solution to) social and cultural problems. As White (2013) has argued, this simplified view can be put to a number of political ends, including: the construction of a new vocabulary of division and collectivism, providing 'a way to speak to those presumed no longer reachable with a class vocabulary' (White 2013, p. 235); the avoidance of discussion about other social divisions and inequalities; and a rationale for the rationalisation of welfare resources. Understanding the form

taken by generationalism in the present context requires that we engage with the various ways in which the concept of 'generation' itself is understood and deployed.

Generation is a complex and multi-faceted concept, the meaning of which is intimately linked to the discipline, or even branch of discipline, that is studying it (Kertzer 1983). Within social science, it has a dual meaning, 'referring to both family and kinship structures on the one hand, and cohorts (or age sets) on the other' (Burnett 2010, p. 1). It is also powerfully informed by Karl Mannheim's theory of 'The Problem of Generations', published in the 1920s within a collection of 'Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge' (Mannheim 1952; Pilcher 1994; Spitzer 1973). Mannheim formulated the problem of generations in terms of the problem of consciousness: how people who come of age in particular historical epochs work up their experiences; and how knowledge is transmitted, received, and renewed by the interaction between 'new participants in the cultural process' (Mannheim 1952, p. 292) and the society into which these participants are born and develop, and which they, in turn, transform.

By situating the concept of generation within the sociology of knowledge, we are able to appreciate that generations are both constructed by, and portrayed as representative of, the social, cultural, and political events of their time. As such, they have a symbolic, rather than simply biological, existence (Mannheim 1952; Nash 1978; Wohl 1980). In 'thinking generations' (White 2013), contemporary society is working through ideas about historical events and present-day problems. This has had a powerful impact on framing debates about social problems and inequalities – in particular, those debates concerned with the fortunes of younger and older people.

Scholars and advocacy organisations have critiqued the ways in which stereotypes and 'myths' about the Baby Boomers have been deployed to construct older people as a problem (Auer 2013; Phillipson et al. 2008; Lodge et al. 2016; Ready for Ageing Alliance 2015; Walker 1996), and have drawn attention to the 'casual use of demonising and divisive language' used with regard to Baby Boomers in the wake of the Brexit vote (Allen 2017). However, little attention has been paid to the *how* such stereotypes of Baby Boomers and older people – and by extension, Millennials and younger people – came to play such a prominent role in debates surrounding the EU Referendum, or to the implications of this for the concept of generation itself.

## **Methodology**

This paper presents some recent findings from an ongoing study of the role of claimsmakers in the construction of the Baby Boomer generation as a social problem. Situated within the constructivist tradition of the study of social problems (Best 2017), and informed by Mannheim's (1952)

conceptual grounding of generations within the sociology of knowledge, the study seeks to understand how a social phenomenon (in this case, the particular generation known as the 'Baby Boomers') has become represented as a cause of myriad difficulties facing society in general, and particularly young people, in the present day. This endeavour requires a methodological approach that allows us to identify the characteristics and aetiology of this claim, within its wider social, cultural, and political context.

To this end, the study has analysed the discursive framing of the Baby Boomer generation within articles published in UK national newspapers over a period of time. By studying national newspapers, we are able to explore how claims about the Baby Boomer generation are constructed and amplified through elite cultural channels, in the context of wider events that make and shape the news. 'The news' is produced and consumed across a range of platforms, including radio, television, websites, and social media; however, there are some compelling methodological reasons for a focus on newspapers here. National newspapers – unlike social media – are elite products, subject to editorial direction and partisan loyalties, meaning that claims tend to be framed by the newspaper's 'editorial line'. In contrast to website-based news, archived newspaper articles are relatively stable, and less likely to change after initial publication. Unlike much broadcast media, print media has a discursive quality that allows us to analyse the arguments of individual journalists, who can play a significant role in the claimsmaking process.

A large, initial study provides the background to the findings presented in this paper (Bristow 2015). Qualitative media analysis (Altheide 1996) was conducted of the text of articles appearing in the British national news press between January 1985 and December 2011, and indexed in the LexisNexis database, which used the terms 'baby' AND 'Boomer'. That study found that journalistic narratives have connected Baby Boomers with a range of wider anxieties about economic issues, welfare resources, and cultural conflicts, and that this connection has become more explicit and causally-framed in the context of recent economic crises. Such claims do not appear to reflect partisan positions, or the 'editorial lines' of particular newspapers.

Since completion of the initial study, news reports and commentary have reflected a consolidation of the claim that Western societies are witnessing a new era of generational conflict, in particular between two generations: the 'Baby Boomers' and the 'Millennials' (Bristow 2019). As noted above, the apparent 'age divide' in voting preferences around the EU Referendum was widely reported as evidence of the existence, and depth, of this deeper conflict, in a context where national newspapers explicitly positioned themselves as being in favour of, or opposed to, Brexit.

To investigate the characteristics of this latter narrative, a further, small study analysed a dataset of articles drawn from all UK national newspapers, between the dates of 1 May and 30 September 2016, using the terms 'Baby Boomer' AND 'Millennial'. Again, these were analysed using qualitative media analysis, a method that blends 'the traditional notion of *objective content analysis* with *participant observation* to form *ethnographic content analysis*, or how a researcher interacts with documentary materials so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis' (Altheide 1996, p. 2, emphasis in original). This method thus allows for a 'contextual constructionist' approach to the study of social problems, which does not focus on the language alone, but engages with the meaning it derives from the social problem under consideration, and how this problem comes to be framed (Best 2003; Berger and Luckmann 1991). The sample's timeframe was chosen to capture the discourse surrounding the EU Referendum, and the search terms were chosen to include articles that did not explicitly discuss the Brexit vote, thereby allowing for an analysis of the wider context in which discussions about comparisons and conflict between the two generations appear. The dataset comprised national broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, whose editorial positions represented both sides of the Leave/Remain divide.

An initial search of the LexisNexis database yielded 153 results. After reviewing for relevance and repetition, the final dataset consisted of 107 articles, which were read and coded according to main themes and sub-themes. A thematic review of the findings is presented below, followed by a discussion of their significance to a wider analysis of the social construction of the problem of generations. Exemplifying headlines and standfirsts are noted to illustrate the narrative form of particular claims, along with the title of the newspaper and the article's publication date.

## **Findings**

The following main themes were identified: economic inequality (n. 24); housing (n. 15); pensions (n. 2); Brexit (n. 14); UK politics (n. 8); US election (n. 9); culture (n. 8); lifestyle and growing up (n. 19); Boomer-blaming (n. 3); and work (n. 5). The articles did not, of course, fit into these categories tidily, with many themes appearing simultaneously. For example, one opinion piece in the *Independent* leads with the following standfirst:

Older readers are saying that young people should simply adjust their expectations downwards. That would be rather rich considering the extent to which the expectations of the over-sixties are being catered to by politicians, whether through a generous 'triple lock' on state pension increases, or maintaining tight regulatory controls on new housing

construction, or even pulling the UK out of the European Union when most people under 30 want to stay. (Chu 2016)

However, most of the articles analysed (comprising news reports, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor) contained a discernible focus, which can be categorised by three overall themes: (i) the 'economic divide' between the generations; (ii) the 'generational divide' in politics; and (iii) 'cultural differences' between the generations.

### The 'economic divide' between the generations

The largest group of articles counterposed the economic situation confronting Millennials with that allegedly enjoyed by the Baby Boomer generation. Specifically, these related to: **young people's earnings** ('Millennials earn £8,000 less in their 20s than their parents, study warns; And a post-Brexit downturn could depress millennials' wages even further', *Independent* 18/7/16); **the distribution of welfare resources** ('Tory tax and benefit plans "widen generation divide"; Split seen in EU referendum will worsen as cash redistributed to the old, independent analysis finds', *Observer* 3/7/16); **the rate of inflation** ('Inflation is three times higher for under-30 Millennials than retirees thanks to the rising cost of rent, smartphones, meals out and uni', *Mail* 10/5/16); and **access to new technology** ('For Millennials, Pokémon is no substitute for a decent home and income', *Independent* 20/7/16).

The Brexit vote was presented as a **harbinger of future economic inequality between the generations** ('Millennials will see two recessions before the age of 30; Brexit is turning a clash of generations into a crisis; The generations with the least to lose have piled economic misery on young people's heads', *Independent* 24/6/16), and **an urgent justification for a policy focus on 'intergenerational equity'** ('After Brexit, we must strengthen the ties between young and old; That responsibility has been taken far too lightly in recent years with little attention paid to the intergenerational impact of big public policy decisions', *Observer* 3/7/16).

The articles on housing focused variously on **home ownership** ('Millennials aren't buying homes right now. What if they never do?', *Guardian* 27/5/16); **the cost of renting** ('Under 30s charged £44,000 more on rent than their parents; If it feels like you're spending all your money on rent and your parents had it easy, you're right', *Mirror* 16/7/16); and **living at home with parents** ('Forget granny flats – now more graduates and young adults live with their parents than with flatmates or partners', *Telegraph* 30/8/16). A handful of articles reported on **inheritance** ('Selfish Baby Boomers: generation wants to spend, spend, spend, rather than leave cash to their children', *Mail* 17/8/16).



These articles reflect an established cultural script that situate the Baby Boomer generation as a cause of the social and economic problems of the present day (Bristow 2015). They also, however, reflect recent, energetic claimsmaking activity carried out by the Intergenerational Commission (IC). The IC was established by the Resolution Foundation think-tank between 2016 and 2018, to draw together 'leaders from business, academia and policy-making' to 'explore the questions of intergenerational fairness that are currently rising up the agenda' and 'devise a means of repairing the social contract between generations' (Intergenerational Commission 2018). Its first report, *Stagnation Generation: The case for renewing the intergenerational contract* (Gardiner 2016a) was launched in July 2016, with a press release headlined: 'Millennials facing "generational pay penalty" as their earnings fall £8,000 behind during their 20s' (Resolution Foundation 2016). The analytical device employed in this report – and reflected in the IC's subsequent publications – was to compare the economic fortunes of the 'Millennial' generation with those of older generations, finding that the Millennials' current situation and future prospects are relatively worse. As such, the IC's research seeks to re-frame the *economic* conflicts, over wages, property prices, and pay progression that characterise the current UK context of austerity and stagnant economic growth, as *generational* conflicts related to 'fairness'.

#### The 'generational divide' in politics

A number of articles presented the Brexit vote in terms of a clash of political interests between the generations. Some discussed the **apparent political divide *within* generations** in the context of campaigning around the US presidential election ('American voters are more polarized than they have been in 46 years – and it's MILLENNIALS driving the divide', *Mail* 7/9/16); however, in the UK context, such intragenerational distinctions were rarely discussed. The suggestion that **older generations had an unfair democratic advantage** in the EU Referendum was consolidated in later articles, which reported the Intergenerational Commission's claim that the Baby Boomers' relatively large cohort size, combined with their relatively high rates of voter turnout, resulted in a 'four million person ballot box advantage' for the Boomers in the 2015 General Election (Gardiner 2016b). This gave rise to headlines such as: 'Voting turnout gap between old and young widening – report' (*Guardian* 23/9/16), and 'Democracy at risk as Baby Boomers dominate voting' (*i-Independent* 23/9/16).

A number of articles presented the Leave vote as a generalised **extension of alleged Boomer evils** ('Baby Boomers will add insult to injury if they vote to leave the EU, *Independent* 23/6/16), and a **'betrayal' of younger generations** ('Young people on the EU referendum: "It is the end of one world, of the world as we know it"; Having overwhelmingly voted to remain, many feel betrayed by an

older generation who turned their backs on Europe but who will not be around to see the damage wreaked', *Observer* 26/6/16). One article reported on the eruption of an **online squabble between Boomers and Millennials** ('War on Millennials! Baby Boomers take to Twitter to point out the flaws of the younger generation with #HowToConfuseAMillennial hashtag', *Mail* 5/9/16). Others, however, aired **disquiet about the Boomer-blaming** ('We're all playing the Brexit blame game', *Telegraph* 27/6/16; 'Don't blame the Baby Boomers if their children are have-nots; Boomer bashing has become a new form of bigotry', *Telegraph*, 19/7/16).

#### 'Cultural differences' between generations

Discussion of apparent cultural differences between younger and older generations reflects an enduring interest by the news media in the generational framing of cultural trends, and the consolidation of stereotypes around particular generational categories (for example, 'Baby Boomer' and 'Millennial'). These included reflections on **young people's alleged over-sensitivity and reluctance to grow up** ('Has politically correct culture gone too far?... Dave Schilling... wanders into the very unsafe space that is the schism between millennials and their predecessors', *Guardian* 16/5/16; 'Lessons in how to raise an adult; Today's students are so mollycoddled they are unable to stand on their own feet, says Julie Lythcott-Haims', *i-Independent* 16/6/16).

Reports that young people **no longer engage in the hedonistic behaviour associated with the Baby Boomers** generated a number of headlines ('They don't drink, smoke or go clubbing: they're the new young fogeys', *Times*, 13/6/16; 'A case of no sex please, we're totes millennials'; *Sun* 13/8/16; 'Revealed: Millennials spend more on "health" foods and drink less than previous generations but are more likely to be obese and struggle to lose weight when older', *Mail* 3/6/16). Apparent **generational differences in the workplace** provoked some reports ('Why having a millennial as your boss might solve the gender pay gap problem', *Independent* 24/8/16; 'Millennials have created a generation of "work martyrdom" and don't use all their vacation days, report says', *Mail* 26/8/16).

#### **The consolidation and extension of generational grievance**

Overall, this thematic categorisation indicates that media discussions about 'Baby Boomers' and 'Millennials' are linked with a wide range of specific news topics, and that the assumption of an economic and political conflict between the two generations has become an established trope. When we look beneath the headlined themes to a closer examination of the content of the articles, we can isolate three related characteristics of the 'generational conflict' narrative. First, it relies on a *promiscuous use of the term 'generation'*, often conflating several senses in which this concept is

used – to denote particular cohorts, kinship relations, life stage, or historical period – and using the term ‘generation’ interchangeably with ‘age’. Second, it *consolidates a pre-existing sentiment of generational grievance*, relying on a claim of Baby Boomers’ culpability for economic and political problems to make the generalised claim that the Boomers have ‘betrayed’ the younger generation. Third, it interacts with significant *claimsmaking activity* that seeks to politicise generational divisions.

These three characteristics were apparent before the Brexit vote. However, as discussed below, the discursive framing of the EU referendum in terms of generational conflict both illustrated the influence of generationalism in making sense of current socio-political events, and extended its impact. In some cases, those wishing to promote the claim of a conflict of interests between the generations deployed the Brexit vote as a dramatic example of such polarised interests. In others, those opposed to the result of the referendum drew upon claims of intergenerational ‘injustice’ to gain moral authority for their position.

Looking first at the promiscuous use of the term ‘generation’, we see that the label ‘Baby Boomer generation’ is used interchangeably with the elastic and relative category of ‘older generation’: as in, ‘This vote doesn't represent the younger generation who will have to live with the consequences: Millennials vent fury at Baby Boomers for voting Britain OUT of the EU’ (*Mail* 24/6/16); ‘The over-fifties have gambled away my generation's future. We must not stand for this’ (*Independent* 27/6/16). This conceptual slippage obscures the differences in voting preference between members of different generations, and uses the concept of generation as a crude proxy for age. We see this in the wider discussion of economic inequality between the generations, where the terms ‘Baby Boomer’, ‘pensioner’, ‘the old’, and ‘older generation’ are frequently used interchangeably – implying simultaneously that all Boomers are the dependent elderly, and that all old people are affluent Boomers.

Such conceptual slippage is sometimes acknowledged by claimsmakers, but considered to be justifiable within the wider context of the Boomer-blaming. James Moore (2016a), writing in the *Independent*, refers to a piece that he wrote before the EU referendum (J. Moore 2016b), in which he suggested ‘that if the Baby Boomers ended up forcing a Brexit they would be delivering a slap to the faces of their Millennial grandchildren’. He admits that in that previous article, he was ‘dealing in generalisations’: ‘There are Millennials who voted out, and a lot of their grandparents (including I'm proud to say my children's grandmother) who voted in’. Nonetheless, he maintains:

But from a generational perspective the point remains valid, because that's just what the Boomers, as group, did. Free higher education, copper bottomed pensions, cheap housing, and so on. They've have had a great ride and they've capped it by kicking their inheritors in the teeth. (J. Moore 2016a)

A *Telegraph* report headlined 'Millennials' "fury" over Baby Boomers' vote for Brexit' (Boult 2016) cited a number of tweets criticising 'the older generation' for voting in a different way to 'the younger generation'. For example: 'Jokes aside I'm actually scared. Today an older generation has voted to ruin the future for the younger generation'; 'The older generation picks what happens, the younger generation has to live with it'; 'The fact older generations have reaped the benefits & pulled the EU from my generation? Furious. My generation wanted in. It's our time'; 'im actually really upset how selfish the older generations have been' (Boult 2016).

None of the tweets cited by Boult explicitly mentioned the 'Baby Boomers', but his article quoted *Yorkshire Post* columnist Grant Woodward: 'Brexit will come to be seen as the Baby Boomers' ultimate betrayal of younger generations and those that will follow. A knee-jerk response to a series of red herrings, a protest vote with the potential for long-term catastrophe that they won't be around to endure' (cited in Boult, 2016). Woodward's *Yorkshire Post* article, however, begins by recounting a conversation with his father: 'a man who was born just before the outbreak of the Second World War but who has shared the same benefits as the Baby Boomers who followed in his wake after peace broke out across Europe' (Woodward 2016). We can see in this example that the 'Baby Boomer' – even when used with reference to a close family member – is used to denote an ideal person-type, rather than an actual member of the 'Boomer' birth cohort. It is this symbolic construction, however, that drives the headline of Boult's (2016) article.

A related conceptual slippage is revealed by the use of the kinship sense of generations – parents and children – to present alleged inequalities between Baby Boomers and Millennials. For example: 'Baby Boomers, you have already robbed your children of their future. Don't make it worse by voting for Brexit' (*Independent* 22/6/16); 'The new inequality: Are you part of the first generation EVER to earn less than your parents?' (*Mirror* 18/7/16); 'Young renters £44,000 out of pocket by the age of 30 compared to their parents' (*Independent* 18/7/16). The counterposition of 'parents' to 'children' gives claims about generational conflict an intimate, personalised quality, adding a dramatic *frisson* to comparisons of the relative fortunes of birth cohorts, by representing them as acts of parental harm or neglect. This is apparent in a number of the opinion pieces within the dataset, where journalists make self-conscious reference to their own location within the 'younger generation', thereby acting as moral entrepreneurs in the development and extension of the Boomer-blaming

claim. It should be noted, however, that claims about the problem of the 'Baby Boomers' are not only, or even primarily, made by Millennial writers, but have also been popularised by Baby Boomers themselves (for example, Beckett 2010; Willetts 2010).

By drawing on an established narrative that presented young people as being *generally* victimised by their elders, such interpretations of the Brexit vote consolidated and extended an existing sentiment of generational grievance. In the present-day cultural script, the Boomers are presented as a problem not only because they are seen, *as a generation*, to have enjoyed certain advantages and done certain things, but because of the *kind of people* they are seen to be. This lends the discourse of the Baby Boomers a distinctly emotive quality. As Loseke (2003) explains, the construction and categorisation of social problems often 'simultaneously construct the types of *people* who inhabit those categories', and 'discursive productions of people-types simultaneously construct preferred *emotional orientations* and responses toward the constructed categories' (Loseke 2003, pp. 120-1, emphasis in original). This is evident in the construction of the Baby Boomer caricature as the archetypal 'villain' in the narrative of generational conflict, with the caricatured 'Millennial' assigned the symbolic role of 'victim'. In this vein, Charlie Cooper wrote in the *Independent*:

Long before the referendum was even called, the young had good reason for grievance. The Baby Boomers (and, to a lesser extent, Generation X), having enjoyed the benefits of free higher education and sitting on homes acquired while the going was good, were the architects of a financial crash that laid waste to the economy we millennials were only just becoming active participants in.... While our parents' generation sat pretty on their housing investments, looking forward to generous state pensions and protected pensioners' benefits, we saw public services cut and under-25s were even denied the national 'living wage'. Oh, and thanks for introducing, and then trebling, university tuition fees. (Cooper 2016)

The presumption that the Leave vote represented the latest skirmish in a conflict of sectional interests between the 'older' and 'younger' generations rapidly escalated into claims that about the 'unfairness' of older people having an equal say in 'the future'. Writing that 'anger and despair was echoed by young people around the country, who chose overwhelmingly to stay inside Europe and now feel betrayed by the older voters who secured victory for Brexit', the *Observer* quoted Phoebe Warneford-Thomson, 'an 18-year-old from Bristol who, along with most of her friends, voted to stay in the EU': 'I feel quite bitter that the older generation can celebrate victory, while young people have suffered such defeat and will have to live longest with this decision' (Graham-Harrison 2016). Judith Woods (2016), writing in the *Telegraph* about 'the Brexit blame game', quoted her 14-year-old child as an echo of 'the cry of millennials the length of the land, who feel they have been

betrayed by their inward-looking elders': "“Why were old people even allowed to vote? I mean, they'll all be dead soon”".

The recurring sentiment that older generations should have less of a say on matters of the future than younger generations because they will not as have long to 'live with the consequences', raises some troubling implications. Here, the established rhetorical claim that the Baby Boomers 'took their children's future' (Willett 2010) is given literal expression, in the claim that the act of voting represents an unfair imposition of the Boomers' enhanced 'generational democratic weight' (Gardiner 2016b) against the democratic choices of younger people. Although few claimsmakers have explicitly argued for voting to be weighted according to a citizen's age, the repetition of the claim that Brexit represented a vote made at young people's expense, by people who had less time to live and therefore the least to lose, indicates a symbolic de-authorisation of the senior vote. In a similar way, generationalist generalisations frame discussions about the 'youth vote', assuming that all members of the current younger generation will vote homogeneously, in a particular direction (Kingman 2017; Bristow 2019).

### **The impact of claimsmaking activity**

In this context of a consolidated sense of generational grievance, it is worth attending to the impact of claimsmaking activity on the rhetoric surrounding the Brexit vote that is apparent in national newspapers. Claims about the problem of 'intergenerational equity' emerged in the USA in the 1980s (Quadagno 1990; Walker 1996) and were given political form by the organisation Americans for Generational Equity (AGE), which, although now defunct, had 'considerable influence on the emergence of the issue of intergenerational equity and in its reshaping of political discourse' (Cook 2002). In the UK, however, explicit campaigning around the 'generational equity' cause is a relatively recent phenomenon. This work can be linked to the work of individual claimsmakers, who published high-profile books and associated articles promoting the argument that the Baby Boomers 'took' or 'failed' the future (Willett 2010; Beckett 2010), resulting in a 'jilted' generation of 'bankrupted' youth (Howker and Malik 2010). Howker and Malik were involved in the establishment, in 2011, of the Intergenerational Foundation, to draw attention to the question of 'fairness between the generations' and to 'get a fairer deal for young people' (Intergenerational Foundation 2018). Willett chaired the Intergenerational Commission that, as noted above, was established in 2016 to promote the need for 'intergenerational equity' policies (Intergenerational Commission 2018b).

Since 2011, claimsmaking activity around the 'Boomer problem' in the UK has developed in two intriguing respects. As noted above, the launch of the Intergenerational Commission supplied the basis for a number of newspaper articles, and indicates the institutionalisation of the

‘intergenerational fairness’ agenda in mainstream policy circles. Yet there has also been a growing awareness of the potentially divisive implications of Boomer blaming. For example, Lord Filken, Chairman of the Centre for Ageing Better and a participant in the Intergenerational Commission, was moved to caution in a letter to *The Times* (London):

The EU referendum result showed different voting patterns at different ages but it's important not to generalise or overstate differences between generations... We must not blame older generations for the conditions created by the wider economic context of the past 50 years, and we must acknowledge that there are large income inequalities within generations as well as between them. (*Times* 2016)

The institutionalisation of generationalist claimsmaking, combined with a sensitivity to accusations that such claimsmaking might fuel intergenerational divisions, has resulted in a noticeable rhetorical shift, where campaigners present their endeavours as attempts to heal existing generational divisions. Thus, in an article published in July 2016, Intergenerational Commission leaders David Willetts and Torsten Bell emphasised the depth and significance of the ‘generational divide in voting patterns’ exposed by the EU Referendum. They echoed the sentiment of generational grievance, arguing that ‘[t]hose who will live longest with the costs and benefits of leaving the EU voted overwhelmingly for Remain’ and that ‘major policy failures have visibly and viscerally harmed the interests of younger generations’. However, they insisted: ‘these are symptoms of policy and political failure, not of a generational war. Indeed, it is the old who are in many cases most worried about the young or, as they call them, their children and grandchildren’ (Willetts and Bell 2016).

This rhetorical shift takes as its starting point the consolidation of the assumption that there is a conflict of interests between the younger and older generations. The content of the central claim – that policy needs to address questions of ‘unfairness’ between the generations – has not changed. However, the *context* of this claim has changed from earlier attempts to establish it. Analysis of the media narrative of post-Brexit Boomer blaming indicates that the assumption of generational conflict between Boomers and Millennials has now become culturally ingrained: allowing claimsmakers to present their work as healing the very divisions between the generations that their advocacy work has attempted to highlight. The claim that ‘it is the old who are in many cases most worried about the young’ is rhetorically used as a statement of support for politics and policies designed to ‘address [the intergenerational] divide directly’ (Willetts and Bell 2016): despite research, including that commissioned and published by the Intergenerational Commission itself

(Shrimpton *et al.* 2017), suggesting a lack of broad public support for such policies (see also discussion in Cook 2002; Hamblin 2016).

### **Discussion: Implications for ‘the problem of generations’**

In analysing the claim that the Baby Boomers are ‘to blame’ for Brexit, this study contributes to the field of the construction of social problems, by identifying the development and extension of claims about generational conflict in the context of economic austerity and a divisive political event. By taking a constructivist approach to analysing how the cultural script of generational conflict is developed by claimsmakers, and amplified and extended by journalists writing for newspapers, we can deepen our understanding of ‘the way culture is used’ (Swidler 2001, p. 5, emphasis in original) in the consolidation of a generationalist narration of social, political, and economic problems.

With regard to the Brexit vote, we can see that generationalism has become positioned as a frame through which political conflicts about much wider national, social, and political issues – such as Britain’s membership of the EU – can be rapidly, and often uncontroversially, interpreted. This has troubling implications for our understanding both of current events, and of generation itself. In the case explored here, a political issue that was not primarily about generation became reposed as a conflict between old and young. This reposition was effected, not by those individuals who cast their vote on the question of Leave or Remain, but by claimsmakers driven by particular agendas – for example, to promote the social problem of generational unfairness, or to de-legitimise the outcome of the referendum result. In this regard, other social and cultural factors that shaped both the Brexit vote and the media reaction to it, such as class, social status, and geographical location, were minimised by the generation frame, while the presumed commonalities in opinion and experience of people of particular ages was overstated.

Understanding the influence of generationalism, as a simplified view of generation that is mobilised to narrate wider social and political problems, can also help us to clarify the concept of *generation* within the current context. In theorising the interaction between wider social events and generational consciousness, Mannheim added depth and nuance to sociological understandings of how relations between history and biography come to be worked through. He described generational location as analogous to class location: people are born into a particular generation, and as such share an experience of the world. However, generational location does not itself give rise to generational consciousness: the emergence of an ‘actual generation’ depends on the interplay with wider social forces, and members of this generation will work up their experiences in different ways, giving rise to distinct ‘generation units’. What comes to be represented as the voice



of a generation is the outlook of the generation unit that most clearly expresses the *Zeitgeist*, rather than the opinion or experience of an entire cohort (see discussion in Bristow 2015, 2016).

Mannheim's theory remains a powerful basis for understanding how it is we come to talk about generations – and what we mean when we do so. However, it is acknowledged that Mannheim's theory of generational consciousness cannot help us to understand *everything* about generations: for example, the complex web of personal relations and social contexts that frame people's experience over the life course (Pilcher 1995; Hareven 2000). Indeed, the increasing use (and, arguably, over-use and abuse) of the concept of 'social generations' has been charged with applying a homogenising and reductive logic to social categorisation, which subsumes arguably more significant effects of class, gender, ethnicity, and geographical location (France and Roberts 2015). The exaggeration of cultural differences *between* different generations, as illustrated by the narrative of post-Brexit Boomer blaming, tends to minimise the significance of shared interests, experiences, and aspirations that are held *across* the generations, thereby limiting the intergenerational conversation necessary for the transmission and renewal of knowledge (Mannheim 1952).

The impact of generationalism means that discussions about the Baby Boomer generation in the present-day context are framed by a range of very contemporary concerns. The meaning of the 'Baby Boomer generation' is thus socially constructed, not only by the factors that gave rise to its own generational consciousness, but by ideas *about* the Baby Boomers that have developed in a later context, in which 'generational thinking' has become an increasingly significant political and cultural frame (White 2013). A similar dilemma emerges with discussions about the 'Millennials' – the 'other generation' in the drama of the generation wars. Much of the debate about the Millennials has been scripted by claimsmakers talking about, or on behalf of, the 'younger generation', writing a wide array of social, cultural, political, and economic anxieties into a pre-existing script of generational tension and conflict. In the narrative of 'victims and villains' (Best 2017) that characterised generationalist claimsmaking following the Brexit vote, Millennials were portrayed in a generally sympathetic light. However, in wider cultural discussions of the Millennials, negative stereotypes also abound (Bristow 2019); and as Marwick wryly noted five decades ago, 'there is probably always one final sanction on the power of youth: the process of growing older' (Marwick 1970, p. 51).

## **Conclusion**

Disentangling authentic expressions of generational consciousness from the ascendant generationalist narrative is a difficult challenge, particularly in the emotionally-charged context of

post-Referendum Britain; but one that the generational dimension of the sociology of knowledge should urgently consider. This study has revealed that, in the narrative offered by UK national newspapers, cultural assumptions regarding the depth and definitiveness of the 'age divide' in the Referendum vote have fused with particular generational stereotypes to construct the post-factual claim that the Baby Boomers, *as a generation*, are to blame for Brexit. In this context, it behoves sociologists to go beyond such reductive accounts, to understand the deeper dynamics at work in the construction and amplification of this claim, and to approach an understanding of how and why the concept of generation has become weaponised in the current socio-political moment.

## **Bibliography**

- Allen, V. (2017). 'Baby Boomer "used as term of abuse since the Brexit vote"'. *Daily Mail*, 30 November.
- Auer, J. (2013). *Baby Boomers: Busting the Myths*. Prospect Hill: Pink Gum Publishing.
- Altheide, D. L. (1996). *Qualitative Media Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Becker, H. S. (1997 [1963]). *Outsiders: Studies in Sociology of Deviance* (new edn). New York: Free Press.
- Beckett, F. (2010). *What Did the Baby Boomers Ever Do For Us? Why the children of the sixties lived the dream and failed the future*. London: Biteback.
- Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. (1991 [1966]). *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Best, J. (2003). 'But Seriously Folks: The limitations of the strict constructionist interpretation of social problems.' In J.A. Holstein and G. Miller (eds), *Challenges and Choices: Constructionist perspectives on social problems*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, pp. 51-69.
- Best, J. (2017). *Social Problems*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Boult, A. (2016). 'Millennials' "fury" over Baby Boomers' vote for Brexit.' *Telegraph*, 24 June.
- Bristow, J. (2015) *Baby Boomers and Generational Conflict*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bristow, J. (2016) *The Sociology of Generations: New directions and challenges*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bristow, J. (2019) *Stop Mugging Grandma: The 'generation wars' and why Boomer blaming won't solve anything*. London: Yale University Press.

Chu, B. (2016). 'If you think millennials are complainers who haven't been hard done by, you need to hear the facts.' *Independent*, 19 July.

Cohen, S. (2011 [1972]). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cook, F. L. (2002). 'Generational Equity.' *Encyclopedia of Ageing*. Gale Group Inc.

Cooper, C. (2016). 'Millennials will see two recessions before the age of 30. Brexit is turning a clash of generations into a crisis.' *Independent*, 24 June.

Curtis, C. (2017). 'The demographics dividing Britain.' YouGov, 25 April. Retrieved from: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/04/25/demographics-dividing-britain>

France, A. and Roberts, S. (2015). 'The problem of social generations: a critique of the new emerging orthodoxy in youth studies'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(2), pp. 215-230.

Gardiner, L. (2016a). *Stagnation Generation: The case for renewing the intergenerational contract*. London: Resolution Foundation.

Gardiner, L. (2016b). *Votey McVoteFace: Understanding the growing turnout gap between the generations*. London: Resolution Foundation.

Graham-Harrison, E. (2016). 'Young people on the EU referendum: 'It is the end of one world, of the world as we know it.' *Observer*, 26 June.

Hamblin, K. (2016). 'Older People'. In P. Alcock, T. Haux, M. May, & S. Wright (eds) *The Student's Companion to Social Policy* (5<sup>th</sup> edn). London: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 432-438.

Hareven, T. K. (2000). *Families, History, and Social Change: Life-Course and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press.

Howker, E. and Malik, S. (2010). *Jilted Generation: How Britain has bankrupted its youth*. London: Icon.

Intergenerational Commission. (2018). Homepage. Retrieved from: <https://www.intergencommission.org/>

Intergenerational Foundation. (2018a) 'The issue'. Retrieved from: <http://www.if.org.uk/the-issue/>

Intergenerational Foundation. (2018b). 'About'. Retrieved from: <http://www.if.org.uk/the-issue/>

Kertzer, D. I. (1983) 'Generation as a Sociological Problem.' *Annual Review of Sociology* (9), pp. 125-149.

Kingman, D. (2017) *Generation Remain: Understanding the Millennial vote*. London: Intergenerational Foundation.

Lodge, E., Carnell, E. and Coleman, M. (2016). *The New Age of Ageing: How society needs to change*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Loseke, D. R. (2003). 'Constructing conditions, people, morality, and emotion.' In J. A. Holstein and G. Miller, *Challenges and Choices: Constructionist perspectives on social problems*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, pp. 120-129.

Mannheim, K. (1952). *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. Edited by Paul Kecskemeti. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Marwick, A. (1970). 'Youth in Britain, 1920-1960: Detachment and commitment.' *Journal of Contemporary History* 5 (1), pp. 37-51.

Matthews, A. (2016). "This vote doesn't represent the younger generation who will have to live with the consequences": Millennials vent fury at Baby Boomers for voting Britain OUT of the EU.' *Mail*, 24 June.

Mills, C. W. (1970 [1959]). *The Sociological Imagination*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Moore, J. (2016a). 'Interest rates are on hold for now, but they could still head down and that means bad news for Baby Boomer Brexiters.' *Independent*, 14 July.

Moore, J. (2016b). 'Baby Boomers, you have already robbed your children of their future. Don't make it worse by voting for Brexit.' *Independent*, 22 June.

Moore, P. (2016). 'How Britain Voted.' YouGov, 27 June. Retrieved from : <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted>

Nash, L. L. (1978). 'Concepts of Existence: Greek Origins of Generational Thought.' *Daedalus* 107 (4), pp. 1-21.

Phillipson, C., Leach, R., Money, A., and Biggs, S. (2008). 'Social and Cultural Constructions of Ageing: the Case of the Baby Boomers.' *Sociological Research Online* 13(3)5.

- Pilcher, J. (1994). 'Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy.' *The British Journal of Sociology* 45(3), pp. 481-495.
- Pilcher, J. (1995). *Age and Generation in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Purhonen, S. (2016). 'Generations on paper: Bourdieu and the critique of "generationalism"'. *Social Science Information*, 55(1), pp. 94-114.
- Quadagno, J. (1990). 'Generational equity and the politics of the welfare state.' *International Journal of Health Services* 20(4), pp. 631-49.
- Ready for Ageing Alliance (2015). *The Myth of the Baby Boomer*. London: Ready for Ageing Alliance.
- Resolution Foundation (2016). 'Millennials facing "generational pay penalty" as their earnings fall £8,000 behind during their 20s.' Press release, 18 July. Retrieved from: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/media/press-releases/millennials-facing-generational-pay-penalty-as-their-earnings-fall-8000-behind-during-their-20s/>
- Shrimpton, H., Skinner, G. and Hall, S. (2017). *The Millennial Bug: Public attitudes on the living standards of different generations*. London: Resolution Foundation.
- Spitzer, A. B. (1973). 'The Historical Problem of Generations'. *The American Historical Review* 78 (5), pp. 1353-1385.
- Swidler, A. (2001) *Talk of Love: How culture matters*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Times* (2016). 'The generation gap and how it can be closed; Letters to the Editor.' 20 July.
- Walker, A. (ed). (1996). *The New Generational Contract: Intergenerational relations, old age and welfare*. London: UCL Press.
- White, J. (2013). 'Thinking Generations.' *British Journal of Sociology* 64 (2), pp. 216-247.
- Willets, D. (2010). *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers took their children's future – and why they should give it back*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Willets, D. and Bell, T. (2016). 'After Brexit, we must strengthen the ties between young and old; That responsibility has been taken far too lightly in recent years with little attention paid to the intergenerational impact of big public policy decisions.' *Observer*, 3 July.
- Wohl, R. (1980). *The Generation of 1914*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Woods, J. (2016). 'We're all playing the Brexit blame game.' *Telegraph*, 27 June.

Woodward, G. 'Brexit is Baby Boomers' ultimate betrayal', *Yorkshire Post*, 24 June.

<https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/opinion/grant-woodward-brexit-is-baby-Boomers-ultimate-betrayal-1-7981175>