# GENDER AND GENERATIONS

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ADVANCES IN GENDER RESEARCH VOLUME 30

# GENDER AND GENERATIONS: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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# GENDER AND GENERATIONS: AN INTRODUCTION

Marcia Texler Segal and Vasilikie Demos

## ABSTRACT

*This introduction discusses the ways the idea of generation has been used in scholarship, for the general public, and in marketing to define and discuss social trends and understand behavior. The need to apply an intersectional lens to the concept is stressed. The eight chapters in the volume, each of which applies such a lens, are summarized. The particular relevance of gender and generation to the current Covid-19 pandemic is highlighted by the introduction and the chapters. Topics include transmission of and changes in gender attitudes and beliefs, generational differences in LGBTQ experiences, retirement and caregiving.*

**Keywords:** Gender attitudes and beliefs; generation; LGBTQ; retirement; caregiving; patriarchy

In the chapter that opens this volume, Pavla Miller uses patriarchy, an implicitly generational term, to demonstrate the value of "thinking with" a concept, that is, using a concept as a guide or touchstone to understand social patterns. Generation itself is a good concept to "think with." Families are composed of generations, economists build generations into their models of economic growth, and the experiences of generations or age cohorts both reflect and precipitate events and changes within societies. Family generations are clearly defined as parents and their children, biological, adopted, or step, and some differences in the behavior of social actors are best explained by their chronological age and lifecycle stage. There are also cohort effects. The impact of major events and social trends, whether positive or negative, is reflected in the behavior and values

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of people who experienced them. Cohorts may vary in size – the pre- and post-World War II cohorts – in diversity, as a result of changes in the emigration and immigration policies of nations, and even in gender composition – the impact of the one child policy in China. Generational variation may lead to structural effects on societies.

There is no scientifically reliable way to define age cohort generations (Dimock, 2019; Rosenberg, 2020). The starting and ending years can be arbitrary; thus, older and younger siblings or first cousins may be in the same familial generation, but be placed in different age cohorts or the most generation-defining events may vary from country to country – the post-Apartheid Born Free generation in South Africa. A bridge between family and cohort generations occurs within immigrant families where the children and grandchildren of immigrants may differ from their parents and their peers, not only in behavior and values but in the way the immigrant experience, irrespective of their country to origin, has impacted them. There can also be institutional generations such as the first cohort of students to attend formerly single gender schools such as the US military academies or Ivy League colleges. Nevertheless, social scientists, social planners, marketing consultants and journalists have found it convenient and productive to designate age cohorts or generations.

Some contributors to this volume focus on family generations. Those who use age cohorts, and we in this introduction, closely follow the spans and terms used by the Pew Research Center and the Population Reference Bureau. Each named generation designates those born within its span: Silent 1928–1945, Baby Boomer 1946–1964, Gen(eration) X 1965–1980, Millennial 1981–1996, and Gen(eration) Z 1997–2012. Mark McCrindle and Emily Wolfinger (2009) call the first generation all of whose members were born in the twenty-first century (2010–2024) Generation Alpha, but perhaps it will be called the Covid-19 generation. The name Silent Generation has been attributed to Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemmingway and Baby Boomers to the US Census Bureau (see Rosenberg, 2020 for a history of generation names and their variations).

Neil Howe and William Strauss (2007) have been credited with popularizing the idea of thinking with generations; however, their idea of using generations for historical analysis and prediction has not been widely accepted. The essential premises of their work are reflected in their 2007 *Harvard Business Review* article, "The next 20 years: How customer and workforce attitudes will evolve." Duane F. Alwin and Ryan J. McCammon (2003 and elsewhere) have wrestled with defining generation and distinguishing generation from related concepts including kinship generation and cohort in the sense of a group of individuals who were born in a given year or experienced the same event when they were roughly the same age. For example, in this introduction we refer to the Class of 2020 meaning those individuals who completed an educational milestone such as high school or college in this year during the Covid-19 pandemic. They also refer to historical generations, that is, "*groups of people who share a distinctive culture and/or a self-conscious identity by virtue of their having experienced the same historical events* at roughly the same time in their lives" (p. 27, italics in the original), denoting these with a capital G. Generations in this sense could be composed of a group of

adjacent birth year cohorts, but not all groups of cohorts would constitute capital G Generations.

The named twentieth-century generations offer a useful tool to identify people who may have things in common from their lived experiences and may be facing similar options and opportunities at their present lifecycle stages. However, they have not always been employed through an intersectional lens. Not everyone who lives through a specific period of years or through a particular event has the same experience. In the United States, for example, World War II and its aftermath had an impact on the lives of all members of the Silent Generation who lived through it and the Boomers who were born immediately following it. However, the lives of women and men before, during and just after the war were very different. Men fought overseas, women worked on the home front, but lost their jobs and independence after the war. Black and white service members fought in segregated units and returned to segregated communities. White men who served gained opportunities for education and housing through the G.I. Bill, but owing to the segregation of communities and institutions, black veterans for the most part did not. The impact of those differences is felt today as white families have more generationally accumulated wealth and Boomer women have had fewer opportunities for savings and investment toward retirement.

In the United States, the racial/ethnic composition of twentieth-century generations is varied. The Silent Generation included immigrants and their children from the 1880 to the 1920 wave of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The National Origins formula that guided immigration policy from the 1920s to 1965 meant that Boomers were born in an era that restricted immigration in a manner that favored Northern and Western Europeans. The changes with the 1965 Hart–Celler Act meant that Gen X and the generations that followed would be more racially and ethnically diverse, but Latinx, Asian, African and Caribbean members of the X, Millennial and Z generations have not experienced life exactly as whites or as those blacks whose generational history includes enslavement in the United States.

## THE GENERATIONS CONCEPT AS USED OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA

Yankelovich Partners, a market research firm founded in 1958 by social scientist Daniel Yankelovich, began using focus groups and surveys to study consumer behavior and employing the concept of generations to provide marketing advice to for-profit and not-for-profit organizations interested in reaching specific segments of the population effectively. J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman (1998) chronicled this work in *Rocking the ages: The Yankelovich report on generational marketing*. An example of this type of marketing research is a table from YPB+R/Yankelovich National Leisure Monitor showing that 57% of Millennials, 53% of Gen X, 38% of Boomers and 24% of the mature generation are interested in theme park travel. The table also

provides data by gender and income level (https://image.slideserve.com/4962/nationwide-interest-in-theme-park-travel1-l.jpg).

The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact tank, uses named generations extensively in its reports and analyses. A recent example of the flexibility and productivity of thinking with generations is the publication by Amanda Barroso, Kim Parker, and Jesse Bennett (2020): "As Millennials near 40, they're approaching family life differently than previous generations." Using publicly available data they:

> compared members of four generations, when they were ages 23 to 38 years old: Millennials in 2019, Gen Xers in 2003, Baby Boomers in 1987 and members of the Silent Generation in 1968. (p. 2)

Racial/ethnic intermarriage is more common for Millennials than previous generations. Because women now out-pace men in college graduation, Millennial women are less likely than women in previous generations to have a college-educated spouse. However, Millennials are not entirely different from adjacent generations. In about two-thirds of two parent households with at least one child at home among Millennials, Gen Xers and Boomers both spouses are/were employed, while in the Silent Generation only 44% of such households had two working spouses.

Two recent articles, one on the opinion page and one in the news section illustrate the ways generations appear in newspapers. When his daughter, son-in-law and twin one-year old grandsons moved in for a Covid-19 quarantine, *New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan (2020) began reflecting on multigenerational households. He thought of the family they used to visit in Italy that included grandchildren and adults who had never left home. Looking at data reported by Pew and the real estate listing firm Zillow, he observed that the size of American households has begun going up, not down. The number of Americans living in multigenerational households is the highest on record; 32 million young adults now live with their parents.

"Child of Immigrants and Face of a New America" was the front-page headline in the *New York Times* article by Sabrina Tavernise (2020) referring to the choice of Senator Kamala Harris as the Democratic vice presidential nominee. Referencing both family generations and age cohort generations, the article deals with the impact of the fact that the roughly 25 million adults who are children of immigrants make up about 10% of the US population. Since recent immigrants, like Sen. Harris' parents, come from non-European countries and most are people of color, the racial/ethnic composition of the population is changing. Boomers, she reports, are 71.6% white, Millennials, 55%, but the post-Gen Z cohort, born after 2012, are just under 50% white.

## OUR POSITIONS

*Marcia Texler Segal*

When we began thinking about a volume on gender and generation, I thought about my own family. Born in 1940, I am from the Silent or Lucky Few

Generation, but my siblings are Boomers. My differences from my siblings do not really stem from the fact that we fit into different named cohorts but from the early circumstances of our lives. Our military father was overseas even before the official start of World War II. Thus, my earliest years were spent as an only child with a circumstantially single mother who, unlike many women of the pre-Silent Generation, attended college and had a profession: she was a dental hygienist. We had no fixed home in the war years, living with relatives most of the time and helping to care for my tween and teen first cousins on my father's side whose mother was ill and a newborn and very premature first cousin on my mother's side during a time when no professional care was available for an at-risk Baby. Mine were not unusual experiences for an American child born in 1940.

My siblings, born in 1947, 1949 and 1950, grew up in a two-parent household with close-in-age siblings; my younger sister sandwiched between our two brothers. I was the older sister who helped to care for them and who, they tell me, set standards for the family in terms of household responsibilities and academic achievement. I never knew my paternal grandparents. My grandmother was atypical for her generation in having some formal education. She was a professional, licensed midwife employed by the city of New York; I have some of her handwritten records. Since my father's siblings were older than he and he married late (age 37), some of my cousins on that side of the family were pre-Silent Generation. Their children were my peers. On my mother's side I was privileged to know my immigrant grandfather for a few years and his second wife, the one who raised my mother after her biological mother died giving birth to her youngest sibling, for many years. One Silent Generation cousin a few years older than me was the first in our family to earn a bachelor's degree; I was the second and the first to earn a master's and doctorate. Here the generations differ, virtually all of the Boomer cousins completed their undergraduate educations and several have advanced and professional degrees.

My family not only crosses the commonly named generations, we count our immigrant generations as well. Both of my parents were born just after their parents reached the United States, but their older siblings were born abroad. The immigrant experience was very real in my growing up as reflected in my parents' fervent desire to assimilate socially – never to appear as if "we just got off the boat" – but to retain an Americanized version of their parents' cultural and religious traditions. The story is told that my grandfather, arriving in a small town in Pennsylvania sometime before 1910 speaking Yiddish and Russian, went to work in a factory and soon learned the language of his co-workers. He assumed it was English, but they were immigrants too, from Sweden. By the time I knew him he had learned English but retained his other languages as well. My parents were raised speaking both Yiddish and English though their Yiddish was of different dialects reflecting their families' origins. Those of my generation and subsequent ones regret that the goal of assimilation caused them to use it only in private and to consciously not teach it to us. There is keen interest today to rediscover this language of our past generations.

My children wanted to learn about their heritage, to study history and ethnic literature, interests they passed to their children. One granddaughter is a

doll-loving person and played with American Girl dolls of several eras and identities but, as a young teen, asked for a genetic heritage analysis kit as a holiday present. The other never showed any interest in dolls except for the one that bore her name and heritage. My grandson, otherwise only interested in sports, is currently exploring the connection between his heritage and politics.

My family is also part of the Shoah or Holocaust generation. Many members of the family, including my grandparents, left Europe in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, but others did not or could not. One of my brothers carries the name of an uncle who perished. Years ago, I visited in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a first cousin of my mother. He told me that when he and his wife tried to leave Lithuania they applied to every English-speaking country. Only South Africa welcomed them. They were not happy to live under Apartheid, but they were grateful to be alive. The shadow of the Shoah is long. Every one of the remaining Silent Generation survivors is treated as a family member and every child and grandchild is taught by Boomer, Gen X and now Millennial parents and teachers about the consequences of hatred and the perils of allowing it to flourish. It facilitates an understanding of oppression and is a motivation for social action, but it can also lead some people to spend time focusing on examples of hostility toward Jews.

I was in college and graduate school in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Just reaching young adulthood I participated in the social movements of the period. My mother, thinking about McCarthyism, black lists and things we watched as a family on the evening news when I was in high school, supported me in acting on my values but suggested that I not put my name on any lists and pay my dues in cash. My educational experience was typical of my generation. I was fortunate to be mentored by members of the faculty, but all were men. After high school I never had a woman instructor and never one who was not white. Some were immigrants and a couple were gay, though of course that was never mentioned. Accepted in top-ranked graduate programs I was not offered financial support, which was reserved for men. Fortunately, the competitive fellowships I earned and some support I eventually received allowed me to complete my degrees.

Younger Silent Generation members like myself and older Boomers like my siblings, colleagues and friends have seen rapid social change in gender, race and LGBTQ relations. We have both caused and benefited from this change, but it is far from complete. Sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia, economic inequality, ableism and ageism still characterize society and impinge on the lives of the generations that follow us.

### *Vasilikie Demos*

My life has been influenced by generation in two senses, as a member of an ethnic group and as a member of a birth cohort. I am the daughter of a second-generation Greek ethnic mother and a first-generation Greek immigrant father. Until I was in high school and a history teacher corrected me, I thought of myself as Greek. I was raised in part to be a traditional Greek woman. I was sent to afternoon Greek School classes to learn about Greek culture including how to

read and write the language, and I was discouraged from mixing too much with "Americans."

My father who was a bit more liberal than my mother expected me to attend college and prepare to be a teacher. He thought it was important for me to "have something to fall back on" in case as a married woman, "something should happen" to my husband. I felt that I was being raised in too strict a way, and I wanted to go to college to get away from my traditional upbringing.

While I was not able to "go away," the college to which I commuted from home gave me another perspective on my life as a Greek. I learned the three-generation model of assimilation into American society. The second generation with whom I identified was caught between the first generation who wished to pass on the ethnic culture to the next generation and the third generation who were fully assimilated Americans. Since I dearly wished to be a "normal" American, this model helped me to understand why I was conflicted.

A couple years after learning about assimilation, I again changed the way I thought about my Greek heritage. My parents gave me a trip to Greece to meet my extended family there – aunts, uncles and first cousins. I fell in love with Greece, but I realized that I was not truly "Greek," but a Greek-American. I've since variously called myself a Greek-American or an American of Greek heritage.

The impact the Baby Boom generation has had on US society and the world has been likened to that of a pig swallowed by a boa constrictor: Just as the movement of the pig through the snake determines which part of it will be swollen so do the stages in the life course of the Baby Boomers determine the products and the issues most relevant to the entire society. At the time of their birth 1946–1964, Baby Boomers were the largest cohort of Americans. With 71.6 million people between the ages of 56 and 74, they are currently second in size only to the millennial generation who at 24–39 years of age constitute 72.1 million of Americans (Kasasa, 2020). The oldest of five children I am also among the oldest of the Baby Boomers, having been born in 1947; my youngest sibling, born in 1960, is among the youngest of this birth cohort.

We, US Baby Boomers, were born in an America which after World War II was coming into its own as the most powerful nation in the world. Having not suffered the destruction of Europe and Great Britain and despite the ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union, the United States was able to assert its position as world leader. Those who fought and survived World War II came home ready to resume family life or to start it with the result of a "boom" in babies and the response of the society to new needs and marketing opportunities. My mother, taking advantage of a new industry, fed me commercially processed baby food, my favorite being plum. The need for new schools to teach the flood of children entering them could not be met fast enough, and many of us were in elementary school classes of 30–40 children.

For the older Baby Boomers, the college years were particularly formative ones. Those of us who entered college in the 1960s became a part of mass higher education, following military veterans who with the GI bill pursued college degrees in preparation of a new corporate economy. Unlike the GIs who were part of the "Greatest Generation" and who had been hailed by American society

as making the world safe for democracy, the core of protests to the unproclaimed war in Vietnam came from college students, many of them young men who protested being drafted into a war that did not seem just. Black students at HBCU's – Historically Black Colleges and Universities – became involved in nonviolent protests, and black students in some PWI's – predominantly white institutions – also began challenging the racism of white students. Colleges and universities became centers for the questioning of the "establishment," American institutions and society. The phrase "Don't trust anyone over 30" which became the battle cry of the 1960s turned upside down the commandment to "respect your elders." Within this context, I wanted to bring about change in American society and I made the decision to become a sociologist.

As I was finishing graduate school and was on the job market, I was struck by the fact that I was not being treated as a sociologist, but instead I was treated as a "woman" sociologist. What I heard from potential employers at various universities was that they were looking for a "qualified" woman sociologist, a requirement not attached to sociologists who were men. In addition, there was an assumption that women were dependent on men. For example, when I saw a job listing for a part-time tenure-track position, I asked what the person who filled that position would do for the rest of the pay; I was told it was assumed that a woman would be holding the position and her husband would be supporting them both! Such experiences made the second phase of the women's movement with its emphasis on equality in education and paid employment relevant to me as part of the unprecedented mass of women who on completing college and graduate school were looking for meaningful work. The women's movement raised many questions about women's place in society, and colleges and universities became centers for informal discussions and ultimately formal programs in what was first called sex roles and later gender studies. Baby Boom women along with women of the Silent Generation just before them were on the ground floor in establishing the study of gender as a credible academic area.

As part of the older Baby Boom, it is interesting for me to consider Millennials or Generation Z and their work for environmental change and the Black Lives Matter movement. They seem to handle diversity including gender, ethnic/racial and class diversity with an ease not experienced by the Boomer Generation. Perhaps, the expression "OK Boomer," used to "call out" closed minded people of the Boomer or older generation, is the replacement for the expression, "Don't trust anyone over 30." As I contemplate the two expressions, I understand that younger generations have something to learn from older ones, but at the same time I also see the importance of older generations listening to and understanding younger ones.

*Class of 2020*

The Corona Virus became a reality in the United States in March 2020, as the numbers of people contacting and dying from the disease mounted. To guard against the virus, at this writing people are advised, in some jurisdictions required,