

“The COVID-19 Generation”: A Cautionary Note

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ABSTRACT

With COVID-19 presenting as a global pandemic, we have noticed an emerging rhetoric concerning “the COVID-19 Generation,” both anecdotally and across various media outlets. The narratives advanced to support such rhetoric have distinct implications for the study of work, aging, and retirement. In this commentary, we review this emerging issue and present evidence against attempts to define “the COVID-19 Generation” as a new construct along conceptual, methodological, as well as practical lines, with a specific focus on identifying real dangers associated with investigating and potentially managing a new generation associated with this pandemic. We strongly caution against the adoption of “the COVID-19 Generation” as a concept of study and instead offer several suggestions to researchers, organizations, and practitioners seeking answers to complicated questions about links between COVID-19 and various processes relevant to work, aging, and retirement during this time of uncertainty.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). At the time of this writing, there have been nearly 490,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in 171 countries, and nearly 22,000 associated deaths, worldwide. These numbers are growing daily at a remarkable rate (Wu et al., 2020). To say that we are experiencing a time of societal and economic uncertainty would be an understatement. During times of uncertainty, humans naturally seek explanations for their own and others’ social behavior (e.g., Kramer, 1999). Indeed, people possess an inherent need to make sense of their social worlds, and actively do so through various means, including the construction and adoption of stereotypes (e.g., Hogg, 2000). To this end, the construction of “generations” (e.g., labeling groups of people as “Baby Boomers” or “Millennials”) serves as one way in which we make sense of our social worlds, particularly when we attempt to understand the inherent complexities of aging and development against the impact of major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Generations can be defined in multiple ways; however, they typically refer to a group of people born during the same time period, who by virtue of their chronological age similarity have had similar life experiences during their formative years. Such experiences are assumed to have an impact on collective attitudes, values, or behaviors (for a review, see Rudolph & Zacher, 2017).

Our goals with this commentary are threefold. First, we describe the emerging generational rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and how this rhetoric has recently filtered into discussions surrounding work, aging, and retirement. Second, we argue that the emerging rhetoric of “the COVID-19 Generation” is not scientifically founded and urge caution about interpreting claims otherwise.

We do so through a discussion of the various conceptual, methodological, and practical problems associated with the (mis)application of generations for making sense of uncertain times, and particularly in light of COVID-19. Likewise, we address real dangers associated with the attempts to investigate and potentially manage “the COVID-19 Generation.” Finally, we offer suggestions for future research on the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to work, aging, and retirement that do not rely on misguided notions of generations.

THE EMERGING RHETORIC OF “THE COVID-19 GENERATION”

Recently, we have observed the emergence of a “generationalized” rhetoric around the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Pariser, 2020a). Specifically, generational narratives have been applied to explain a variety of social and economic phenomena surrounding this pandemic. From what we have seen, this rhetoric and the narratives that it engenders has several themes (Table 1 provides examples of these themes and prototypical media headlines that represent them). First, there have been attempts to suggest that COVID-19 is “bringing out” (assumed) generational differences. Such narratives essentially highlight the behavioral consequences of enacting generational stereotypes, including hoarding among “Baby Boomers” (Helfenbein, 2020; Tyeson, 2020), the need to curtail the selfishness of “Generation Me” to stop the spread of the virus (Pearson, 2020), and looking to members of “Generation X” for tips about how to socially isolate oneself from others (Steiner, 2020).

Second, we have seen themes suggesting that COVID-19 is breeding generational divides emerge from these narratives. For example, owing

Table 1. Example Headlines Capturing “Generationalized” Themes Emerging Around the COVID-19 Pandemic

Theme	Headline	Citation	Source
COVID-19 is “Bringing Out” (Assumed) Generational Differences	“Call Your Mom: The Generational Politics of Covid-19”	Pariser (2020a)	The Boston Globe
	“‘Generation Me’ Must Start Thinking About Others If We’re to Stop the Spread Of Coronavirus”	Pearson (2020)	The Telegraph
	“How Millennials Are Talking to Their Boomer Relatives About the Coronavirus”	Petersen (2020)	Buzzfeed
	“In This Time of Panic, We Look to Generation X for Inspiration”	Steiner (2020)	The Mary Sue
	“Boomers Are Heaping Toilet Paper Stocks into Their Trolleys This AM & The Footage Is Nuts”	Tyeson (2020)	Pedestrian
	“The coronavirus could be Generation Z’s 9/11”	Twenge (2020)	The Conversation
	COVID-19 is Breeding Generational Divides	“COVID-19 and the Generational Divide”	Foroohar (2020)
“A Generational War Is Brewing Over Coronavirus”		Pancevski, Meichtry, and Fontdegloria (2020)	The Wall Street Journal
“Hello, Boomer? It’s Millennials. We need to talk about coronavirus”		Pariser (2020b)	CNN
“What Is ‘Boomer Remover’ And Why Is It Making People So Angry?”		Whalen (2020)	Newsweek
Naming “the COVID-19 Generation”	“Welcome to Generation Crown”	Frometa (2020)	Vents Magazine
	“... Social media users predict a boom of pandemic babies who will be called ‘coronials’ or ‘quaranteens’”	Greep (2020)	Daily Mail
The Effects of COVID-19 are Generationalized	“Gen-Z Expert Says He Was One of First in State Diagnosed With COVID-19”	Divine (2020)	Twin Cities Pioneer Press
	“3 Ways the Coronavirus Outbreak Affects Members of Generation X Differently”	Fabbiano (2020)	Ladders
	“This Generation May Be the Least Likely to Contract Coronavirus Through Touch at Work”	Lepore (2020)	Ladders
	“8 Ways Coronavirus Will Drastically Alter Boomer Retirements”	Novack (2020)	Forbes
	“Is One Generation Taking the Coronavirus Less Seriously Than Others? Not Really”	Butchireddygari (2020)	FiveThirtyEight
	“Worried About Dying From COVID-19? You Might Be A Millennial”	Penn (2020)	The Hill

to the higher observed mortality rates associated with older age groups, COVID-19 has been variously labeled as “the Boomer doomer,” “the Boomer pruner,” and “the Boomer remover,” across various social media platforms (e.g., Whalen, 2020). While seemingly benign, these labels have been accompanied by calls for older people and those who are “not productive” to step aside to benefit future generations (i.e., literally, to accept death in service of the economy; Fisher, 2020). Others have likewise noted that COVID-19 is leading to a new generational divide (Foroohar, 2020), with speculation of impending generational warfare as a result (Pancevski et al., 2020). Likewise, it has been suggested that concerns about contracting COVID-19 fall out along generational lines (Penn, 2020), as do lines of intergenerational communication about the virus and its transmission (Peterson, 2020; Pariser, 2020b).

Third, we have observed several attempts at naming “the COVID-19 Generation.” For example, there has been speculation of a new “baby boom” (Matchan, 2020) and the advent of a new cohort of “COVID-19 babies” approximately 9 months from now, resulting from the isolation of couples with time on their hands, and little to do otherwise. Notably, and hinting at an opposing process, there has also been speculation of increased divorce rates stemming from the same process of social isolation (Landsverk, 2020). This new generation has already been informally dubbed in various ways, including “Generation Crown” (a play on “Corona”; Frometa, 2020), “Coronials,” “Quaranteens” (a play on “quarantine”; Greep, 2020), and “Illenials” (a portmanteau of “ill” and “Millennials”; Starcasm, 2020). Relatedly, there has been speculation that “Z” in “Generation Z” actually stands for “Zoom” (a video

conferencing application favored for virtual meetings; Lorenz, Griffith, & Isaac, 2020). More importantly, perhaps, people have likewise begun to speculate about the future behaviors of those who are currently growing up at this time, as shaped by this pandemic (i.e., the longstanding consequences of patterns of frugality, caution, handwashing, lack of face touching, social distancing habits, etc.; McGonigal, 2020).

Finally, beyond these rather general trends, we also see similar narratives emerging in writings suggesting that *the effects of COVID-19 are generationalized*, with distinct consequences for work, especially regarding aging and retirement. For example, those “exiled” to work from home have been labeled as “the Corona Virus Generation” (Lucas, 2020). Likewise, members of existing younger generations are being classified as particularly well adept at working remotely, with some speculating that nearly universal moves toward working from home to curtail the further spread of the virus satisfy their (assumed) need for such flexibility (Roose, 2020; Withane, 2020). There has also been speculation that the careers of members of “Generation X” will be particularly affected by COVID-19 (Fabbiano, 2020). Moreover, there is speculation about the fallout of COVID-19 for the retirement of “Baby Boomers” (Novack, 2020), and whether members of “Generation Z” will be less likely to contract COVID-19 at work, because they are least likely to engage in physical contact with their coworkers (i.e., compared with members of other generations; Lepore, 2020).

From this brief review, two important things should be clarified. First, although the rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic is being used to intensify intergenerational conflict in some respects, at the same time, there is also anecdotal evidence for intergenerational support emerging from this pandemic (e.g., younger people helping older people with shopping, Gulland, 2020; grandparents watching younger children so that their parents can work, however ill-advised, McAdams, 2020). Second, and more to our point here, there are emerging attempts to label the effects of COVID-19 in generational and generationalist terms (Rauvola, Rudolph, & Zacher, 2019). This comes both in the form of differentiating the consequences of COVID-19 for various (assumed) generational groups (e.g., speculating about differential effects of COVID-19 for “Baby Boomers” vs. “Millennials”), and to ascribe characteristics to a new (assumed) “COVID-19 Generation.” Whereas the former behavior reflects the typical sensemaking process that we see with existing generational rhetoric, the latter behavior is largely speculative about how COVID-19 will affect future generations. The speculation around the assumed generational consequences of COVID-19 is the particular issue that we take up here. Specifically, we argue that such speculation presents a variety of problems, which we will discuss next.

ARGUING AGAINST “THE COVID-19 GENERATION”

Despite the emerging generational rhetoric associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, we see arguments against the establishment of and conduct of research regarding “the COVID-19 Generation” on at least two different fronts: first, there are conceptual, methodological, and practical issues associated with defining “the COVID-19 Generation.” Second, there are real dangers associated with attempts to investigate and potentially manage “the COVID-19 Generation.” Both of these arguments against “the COVID-19 Generation” have a bearing on how we study the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to work, aging, and retirement.

Issues With Defining “The COVID-19 Generation”

First, we address conceptual critiques regarding “the COVID-19 Generation.” To do so, we must first understand how generations are defined not just substantively (e.g., as described above, in terms of groups of similarly aged people who have been shaped by certain societal events during their formative years), but also how this definition translates into scientific terms. From this, the “similarly aged people” component of the substantive definition is termed a “cohort effect”—which is simply delineated by the year in which people are born (e.g., the “cohort” of people born in 2000). Cohort effects (i.e., differences in attitudes, values, or behaviors that can be tied to birth year differences) are typically taken as evidence for the influence of generational differences. For example, taking the birth year as an index of one’s generational membership (e.g., the assumption that those born in 20XX are members of “the COVID-19 Generation”) represents a cohort-based definition of a generation.

The problem with defining generations in this way, conceptually, is that it presents an intractable identification problem when construed against the effects of two other time-based variables, namely “age” and “period” that always co-occur along with cohort effects. On the one hand, age effects are delineated in terms of the time elapsed since one’s birth, and are typically indexed by chronological age (e.g., 20-year-olds). Age effects are typically taken as evidence for the influence of developmental processes, for example, patterns of age-graded personality change and development across adulthood (Nye & Roberts, 2019; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). On the other hand, period effects are delineated by the current year (e.g., 2020). Period effects are typically taken as evidence for the influence of contemporaneous time, including the role that important current events play (e.g., economic conditions, national conflicts, one-off events, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) in shaping attitudes, values, and behaviors.

The intractable nature of age, period, and cohort effects comes to be seen when one tries to identify the source of observed variance in various outcomes (e.g., attitudes, values, or behaviors), holding any one of these sources constant. In organizational research, the source typically held constant is period—that is to say, most typically, we collect data at a single timepoint (e.g., in 2020). If period is held constant, any observed variability in these outcomes could be due to either age or cohort effects. For example, assume that we conduct a cross-sectional survey, sampling from a variety of ages and cohorts, but holding period (i.e., year of data collection) constant. In this case, $\text{period} = \text{age} + \text{cohort}$ (e.g., $2020_{\text{period}} = 20_{\text{age}} + 2000_{\text{cohort}}$). This equation can be rearranged too, for example, we can “solve” for cohort by “subtracting” age from both sides of this equation. In doing so we see that, again holding period constant, $\text{cohort} = \text{period} - \text{age}$ (e.g., $2000_{\text{cohort}} = 2020_{\text{period}} - 20_{\text{age}}$).

The simple-yet-frustrating dependency in this equation highlights a very important point here: cohort effects (and hence, generations) cannot be defined solely in terms of contemporaneous period effects (and vice versa). The linear dependency implied here makes it quite difficult, if not entirely impossible, to ever really study generations, and to ascribe any observed phenomenon solely to their influence. One way to partially circumvent this confounding dependency is to artificially “lump together” members of different cohorts to form “generations” based on ranges of birth years (e.g., those born between 20XX and 20YY are members of “Generation Whatever”). However, this practice results in a number of additional conceptual challenges

associated with the study of generations, not least of which is correctly and consistently identifying the proper range of birth cohorts to be considered for any given generation.

For example, like all generations that are based on groupings of birth cohorts, it is impossible to precisely define the birth cohort range of people who would belong to “the COVID-19 Generation” (e.g., 2000–2010, 2005–2015, or 2015–2020, etc., see [Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012](#); [Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018](#)). Moreover, even if a birth cohort range could be accurately determined, there exists no methodology that can unambiguously separate out the influence of age and/or period effects from cohort effects (see [Rudolph, Costanza, Wright, & Zacher, 2019](#), for a review and critique).

The important point about methodologies to be made here is that even if it were possible to unambiguously identify “the COVID-19 Generation” in terms of a single birth cohort or a range of birth cohorts, it would never be possible truly study this phenomenon, because no methodology exists that would allow for the independent representation of age and period versus cohort effects in an unambiguous way. This is a problem for researchers who may attempt to study the effects of “the COVID-19 Generation” and any other generational grouping construed as such.

If we translate what all of this means back into theory, the purported influence of the COVID-19 pandemic has to be understood as a period effect. In fact, it can only be understood this way—any observed influence that COVID-19 has on attitudes, values, or behaviors (e.g., due to the experience of living through this pandemic) cannot be due solely to an individual’s development (age) or their birth year (cohort), and this relationship may be more complex than either source alone would suggest. It is also important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic is a far-reaching, global phenomenon that already has directly affected/infected hundreds of thousands of people, but has a much broader reach, indeed. At this point, COVID-19 is about as close to a homogenous and constant period effect as we could ever observe. Thus, whatever effects this pandemic will ultimately have on attitudes, values, or behaviors cannot be unambiguously distilled into simplistic generational (i.e., cohort-based) terms; everyone, regardless of their age or birth year, who lived during this period will have shared similar experiences, which confounds generational inferences.

It is also important to point out that period effects may be independent of, or may interact with, age and/or cohort effects ([Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980](#)). For example, although emerging epidemiological data suggest higher rates of mortality among older individuals, COVID-19 is having a global impact upon everyone, regardless of age or cohort membership. Whereas it could be argued that the resulting economic impact of this pandemic will disproportionately affect marginalized populations (e.g., the poor) and specific sectors of the workforce (e.g., those in precarious work arrangements, those in “system-relevant” occupations, self-employed workers), COVID-19 will have far-reaching effects on all workers across all sectors and strata. Although at this point it is difficult to say what the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 will be, it is safe to say that any divisions that do emerge will not be along generational lines (e.g., the impact could emerge as socioeconomic differences; [Muro, Maxim, & Whiton, 2020](#)). For instance, it is possible that employees working for small and medium-sized businesses will be more severely impacted by the pandemic than employees of large organizations (i.e., with resulting effects on individuals’ attitudes, values, and behavior), but it is unlikely that these effects will differ meaningfully across “generations.”

The Real Dangers With Investigating and Potentially Managing “the COVID-19 Generation”

Beyond the conceptual and methodological issues that prevent the identification and investigation of any generational phenomenon (including, but certainly not limited to, “the COVID-19 Generation”), there are a number of practical concerns associated with attempts at investigating and potentially managing different generations and with speculating about or even acting on assumed differences between generations. One of the core concerns we have is the potential for generationalism to emerge around attempts to construct and define “the COVID-19 Generation.” *Generationalism* refers to the espoused belief that members of any given generation possess specific, defining characteristics that distinguish them from members of other generations ([Rauvola et al., 2019](#)).

Generationalism is dangerous in practice, because it legitimizes broadly sweeping generalizations about people based upon assumptions that are made about their status in one birth cohort, or range of birth cohorts, versus another, while ignoring individual differences within cohorts. Generationalism is a form of ageism, that when left unchecked, can result in age-based discrimination. We are already seeing speculation of the role that ageism has played in the broader spread of COVID-19. For example, the WHO Director-General has suggested that some countries deemed the threat “less worthy of the best efforts to contain it” because older people are disproportionately affected relative to younger people ([Aronson, 2020](#); [Barnes, 2020](#)). Likewise, in the United States, the Lieutenant Governor of Texas has suggested that older individuals should be willing to succumb to COVID-19 to benefit the nation’s economy ([Fernandez & Yuhua, 2020](#)).

As suggested, we are also seeing an emerging rhetoric about the qualities assumed to exist in this “new” and “distinct” generation ([McGonigal, 2020](#)). Additionally, we are seeing broad speculation about the impacts of COVID-19 for existing generations. For example, [Twenge \(2020\)](#) has framed COVID-19 as “Generation Z’s 9/11,” and writes, “I fear the pandemic will cement an attitude ... among iGen: The world is not a kind or fair place” (see also similar comments by Twenge quoted in [Sanchez, 2020](#)). Although the broader consequences of this rhetoric have yet to be seen, one issue with such speculations is that they set up the possibility for Pygmalion effects to emerge, in that projecting expectations about qualities of individuals may elicit such qualities from those individuals ([Rosenthal, 1987](#)). For instance, if scholars, journals, and policy-makers broadly characterize the “COVID-19 Generation” as, for instance, insecure or socially challenged, this may not only lead to age-based discrimination of individuals assumed to belong to this generation, but may also have “self-fulfilling prophecy” for these individuals’ in terms of their attitudes, values, and behaviors.

Extending from this a bit, we can see various additional ascriptions that could be just as easily applied to justify work-related decisions (e.g., assumptions of heightened conscientiousness, social distancing tendencies, or prevention focus, to name but a few). It is important to note that there have been a few observed age differences in viewpoints regarding the COVID-19 pandemic ([Butchireddygar, 2020](#)). Considering all of this, we very strongly caution supervisors and organizational leaders as well as scholars and media representatives against trying to distinguish between members of an (assumed) “COVID-19 Generation” and others at work, just as we would caution against differentiating anyone on the basis of assumptions that we make about their age or their membership in one generation versus another.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH BEYOND “THE COVID-19 GENERATION”

Our goal here is not to suggest that there is no value in understanding the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic for various research questions that are relevant to work, aging, and retirement. Rather, we would argue that it is very important to think about COVID-19 as an opportunity to study such phenomena as a period effect, and to understand what influence this will have on work-related attitudes, values, and behaviors understood *in situ* (see Beal & Ghandour, 2011, for a study that examines experiencing a hurricane as a period effect). As such, we conclude here by offering some suggestions for researchers to consider questions that are actually of relevance now (see also Van Bavel et al., 2020, for research suggestions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in social and behavioral sciences more broadly). For instance, the need for rapidly deployed, mass work-from-home policies leads to a variety of interesting possibilities, particularly for researchers who study the interface between work and nonwork, including family and caregiving (e.g., Shockley, 2020). Related to this, it would be particularly important to study how workers in different sectors and occupations suffer disproportionately from this crisis (Gambrell, 2020), especially those that do not have the possibility to work from home (including “system-relevant” occupations, such as doctors, nurses, and public safety officers) or who work in precarious and/or unsafe jobs (e.g., Winkie, 2020). Researchers may also study the long-term consequences of calls for physical and social distancing on work-related processes and outcomes (Resnick, 2020).

More broadly, studying the economic impact of this crisis on workers, especially possibilities for unemployment and underemployment and their associated consequences for work attitudes, values, and behaviors are imperative. Relatedly, studying the economic potentials, especially possibilities for hiring and personnel development needs in specific sectors (e.g., healthcare, grocery stores, supply chain logistics) would likewise be of great importance (e.g., Moench, 2020a). It will also be interesting to understand longer-term potentials for various positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplaces and interpersonal relationships at work, for example, the increased adoption of “work from home” and related time-and-place flexibility policies (e.g., blended work; Van Yperen & Wortler, 2017), the development of enhanced social support among coworkers, as well as increased appreciation for “system-relevant” occupations.

Finally, it will be important to understand how different institutions and organizational leaders are managing this crisis, and especially how workers of different ages are affected by those practices (Moench, 2020b). In order to do so, instead of thinking in terms of the generational implications of COVID-19, we would strongly encourage researchers to adopt a life-span developmental perspective on this phenomenon, which focuses on normative age-graded influences (e.g., general increases in emotion regulation abilities with age), normative history-graded influences (e.g., epi- and pandemics), and non-normative or idiosyncratic influences (e.g., divorce, unemployment) on developmental outcomes (see Baltes, 1987; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017).

Applying a life-span perspective, researchers could consider the differential impact of COVID-19 on the individual developmental paths of workers, without the need to invoke generations as an explanatory mechanism. For example, it has been speculated that older workers are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of COVID-19 and would especially benefit from paid sick leave policies to curtail the

spread of the virus (Ghilarducci, 2020). Another example would be to examine antecedents (e.g., digital competency, emotional stability) and consequences (e.g., occupational well-being, career success) for younger people who successfully manage the school-to-career transition during the pandemic. Overall, it would be interesting to examine how the current pandemic influences the experiences and behavior of workers, not only depending on their chronological age, but also other individual differences (e.g., education, health status, personality) and work-related characteristics (e.g., type of employment, ability to work remotely, organizational support).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is currently, and will for some time, be “top of mind” for many researchers (Clark, 2020; Van Egdome, 2020), workers and organizations (Kirchen, 2020), and practitioners (Divine, 2020) alike, for very good reasons. We hope that our cautionary note motivates all of those concerned with work, aging, and retirement to consider the broader picture of COVID-19 and what it means for individuals and workplaces, rather than focusing on, or broadly speculating about, the generational and generationalized implications thereof. We think there is a great opportunity for researchers, organizations, and practitioners to work together to address the challenges facing all workers as we all navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. We challenge each of these constituents to advance such efforts without invoking unnecessary generational framings.

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