Calculated Ageism:

Generational Sacrifice as a Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Anne E. Barrett, PhD
Department of Sociology
Pepper Institute on Aging & Public Policy
Florida State University

Cherish Michael, MS
Department of Sociology
Florida State University

Irene Padavic, PhD
Department of Sociology
Florida State University

*Corresponding author, 636 W. Call St., Tallahassee, FL 32306-1121; 850-644-8825; abarrett@fsu.edu

Abstract

Objectives: Popular responses to the pandemic illustrate ageism's pervasiveness and the extent of collective acquiescence to its newest expressions. We explore these themes by analyzing Twitter reactions to "calculated ageism" – a term we use to refer to a political figure's edict that older adults should sacrifice their lives if it will mitigate the pandemic's economic damage to younger people.

Methods: Using thematic analysis, we examine tweets (n=188) responding to Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick's March 23, 2020, statement that encouraged generational self-sacrifice. Themes that emerged included positions of support or opposition and tweeters' critiques.

Results: The large majority of tweets – 90 percent – opposed calculated ageism, while only 5 percent supported it and 5 percent conveyed no position. Opposition centered on moral critiques, political-economic critiques, assertions of older adults' worth, and public health arguments. Support centered on individual responsibility and patriotism.

Discussion: While prior research reveals ageism to be solidly entrenched in popular culture, our study finds that limits prevail and identifies the reasons underlying them. The most common reasons for opposing calculated ageism center on its immorality and on its privileging of the economic interests of the powerful few over the many, patterns suggesting that the boundaries of ageism are influenced by core beliefs about fairness. They also are shaped by a bedrock conviction that older lives have value. This intergenerational solidarity could be leveraged to reduce ageism during the pandemic and beyond.

Keywords: intergenerational solidarity, geronticide, age stereotypes

Examples of ageism in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are easy to find and appear in descriptions of the virus as "only" affecting older adults, the age-based rationing of ventilators and hospital beds, and the exclusion of nursing homes residents from official death counts. As scholars have noted, such responses illustrate ageism's pervasiveness and taken-for-granted quality (Ayalon 2020; Ehni & Wahl, 2020; Frasier et al., 2020; Previtali, Allen, & Varlamova, 2020; Reynolds, 2020). But COVID-19 responses also reveal that many may balk when ageism transgresses a certain unspoken moral sensibility.

We explore the limits on ageism by analyzing Twitter reactions to a particularly striking example of ageism – Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick's suggestion that older generations sacrifice their lives with the aim of reducing the pandemic's economic damage, assumed to disproportionately harm younger generations. In an interview on Fox News' *Tucker Carlson Tonight* show, Patrick, 69, said:

> No one reached out to me and said, "As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?" And if that's the exchange, I'm all in. And that doesn't make me noble or brave or anything like that. I just think there are lots of grandparents out there in this country, like me, I have six grandchildren, that what we all care about and what we love more than anything are those children. And I want to live smart and see through this, but I don't want the whole country to be sacrificed. […] So my message is "Let's get back to work, let's get back to living. Let's be smart about it and those of us who are 70-plus, we'll take care of ourselves. But don't sacrifice the country, don't do that, don't ruin this great American Dream."

We describe this sentiment as "calculated ageism," a term that captures a feature distinguishing it from most other forms of ageism: its intentionality. When it comes to older adults, justifications for prejudiced beliefs and unfair treatment tend to deny ageist intentions and to affirm positive ones, as evident, for example, in well-meaning but ageist inquiries about whether a clearly mixed-age duo are siblings or in referring to people as "80 years young." Calculated ageism, in contrast, is bold in its ageist claim that older lives are expendable. The distinctiveness of calculated ageism is further illustrated by its difference

from the terms modifying ageism common in the literature, such as "benevolent,"
"compassionate," "positive," "ambivalent," and "passive" (Binstock, 2010; Cary, Chasteen,
& Remedios, 2017; Setzfand & Watson, 2015; Vale, Bisconti, & Sublett, 2020). Although
"negative" and even "hostile" ageism appear (Cary et al., 2017; Palmore, 2001), they do not
go so far as to demand that older adults sacrifice their lives. In Lt. Governor Patrick's tally,
however, there is no pretext of unintentionality or benevolence, which raises the question of
whether there are limits to aggressive and calculated ageism. We address this question by
assessing reactions to his renunciation of the principle that older lives have value.

Methods

Using Twitter's advanced search feature, we identified tweets meeting the following
criteria: they addressed Patrick's statement, were posted the day he made it (March 23,
2020), included the name "Dan Patrick," and were written in English. Our dataset includes
188 deidentified tweets. It also contains each post's retweet count between initial posting and
data collection, roughly one month later (April 24, 2020).

We used thematic analysis, a qualitative method that identifies topics and ideas, with
the goal of revealing overarching patterns (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis, conducted using
Nvivo, involved three steps. First, we read the tweets to develop initial coding categories
(e.g., moral arguments, capitalism, personal stories). Second, we coded each tweet using
these codes, along with others emerging from this more in-depth coding. Third, we examined
the tweets associated with each code to identify justifications for positions of support versus
opposition. Justifications were not mutually exclusive.

Results

Most tweets opposed calculated ageism – 90 percent, compared with only 5 percent supporting it and 5 percent conveying no position [Table 1]. Consistent with these patterns, none of the supportive tweets appeared in the top-10 most retweeted posts [Table 2].

[Tables 1 & 2]

Oppositional Tweets

Moral critique. The most common logic, found in 31 percent of oppositional tweets, centered on moral issues. One invited readers to ponder the following: "Imagine how morally bankrupt you have to be to be Dan Patrick." A similarly straightforward assessment was conveyed by this tweet: "Dan Patrick thinks grandparents would be willing to die to protect the economy. This is morally repugnant." Others offered an explanation of Patrick's position: "Mr. Patrick, are you ready to lead Texans to their death in service to your lust for material wealth?" Another tweet conveying moral objections referred to *Logan's Run*, the book and film describing a dystopian society that killed members when they reached age 30: "My 94 year old grandfather is not a sacrifice. My daughter's 75 year old Papa is not a fucking sacrifice. He's her Papa, and my Dad. And Dan Patrick can fuck right off with his Logan's Run Death Panel bullshit." Another noted the inconsistency between Patrick's statement and his position on abortion, asking "Is Dan Patrick a member of the "pro-life party"?"

Political-economic critiques. Also frequent (26%) were critiques that noted economic or political interests that would benefit from Patrick's suggestion. One referred to the stock market: "'Hey check out that clip where I suggest grandparents willingly sacrifice themselves to the Dow Jones Industrial Average because the GOP's donors don't like being less rich than before' is a bold campaign strategy." Others referred directly to capitalism, as in the following: "Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick is willing to die to save capitalism. I'm not. I'm ready for capitalism to die." Another pointed to the cost in lives lost: "When

capitalism eats itself...Here is Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick advocating senicide because restarting the economy is more important than saving millions of American lives." An even broader critique of capitalism was found in a comparison to environmental policy: *"@DanPatrick thinks seniors should die so capitalism can keep funneling money to top 1% 'for the grandchildren' but climate action to protect the planet for them is unnecessary. Because capitalism."* Another tweet expanded the political-economic critique by referring to racial inequality: "Dan Patrick is an idiot. Also, Black and brown grandparents I know definitely don't want to die for structures that have never worked in favor of them and won't for their grandchildren."

   Assertions of older adults' worth. Nearly one in five oppositional tweets emphasized older adults' economic and social contributions, challenging stereotypes of older adults as unproductive. One highlighted unpaid labor: *"Many older people are raising their grandchildren because of inability of parents to care for them. What happens to those kids if their grandparents die? Not everyone is as expendable as you, Dan Patrick."* More often, such justifications presented personal stories, like the following: "I am raising my two grandchildren. If I sacrifice myself, who will feed them, cloth them, care for them when they are sick, help them with their homework and comfort them when they're scared, like now." Another said: *"I'm 65 and I work full time. My husband is 70 and he works full time. We contribute to the workforce and to the economy. @DanPatrick has a lot of nerve to suggest that we step in front of Trump's bus to slow it down. He will be able to get tested if he gets sick, we won't."* Others noted not only current but also past contributions spanning decades – as the following tweet illustrates: "My father is a 79 year old navy vet & spent 32 years as a machinist. My mother is a 68 year old retired lunch lady. Their lives matter as much as mine and my job."

Public health arguments. Nine percent of oppositional tweets contained public health arguments, as did this one: "Hey, @DanPatrick: How exactly is the 'legacy of our country' well-served by ignoring epidemiologists & doing nothing while an ever larger segment of our society is wiped out? That's the worst legacy we could possibly leave. I hope you enjoyed your 30-second hit on Tucker tonight." Another combined a public health argument with a political-economic one: "Dan Patrick doesn't need to sacrifice himself at the altar of free market capitalism. He can just urge people to stay home, flatten the curve, be responsible. He can urge Trump to produce more supplies and masks and tests. Just learn from South Korea and many of us can live." Other tweets highlighted the logical inconsistency of Patrick's argument, pointing out that the virus impacts all age groups: "I also want to clarify that it wouldn't just be parents or the elderly dying if people followed morally bankrupt Dan Patrick's advice. Many people, including younger ones, would as well. No one should agree with Dan Patrick's way of thinking."

Supportive Tweets

Most of the supportive tweets were straightforward statements, such as the following: "TEXAS Lieutenant governor Dan Patrick said the absolute most brilliant thing you will hear about where we are at right now with this pandemic." Some provided justifications, as did this one focusing on self-reliance: "Lt Gov Dan Patrick says let's get back to living and those of us that are 70+, we'll take care of ourselves... I think we can get back to work." Another justification was patriotism: "Please RT[retweet]!!!! This is fantastic! Dan Patrick is a true American!" Also referencing patriotism was the following: "Yup, the left is lying again about what an America-loving conservative says. Imagine that. @DanPatrick." This tweet's reference to "the left" hints at political conspiracy, as did another: "but, in the videos the left is posting, he literally is saying 'no one called me and said...' Why is the left pretending he's

calling for the elderly to die? What on Earth is wrong with you people? Lt Gov Dan Patrick."

Discussion

Responses to the pandemic that blithely refer to "only" older people dying or assume age-based rationing is appropriate illustrate how entrenched ageism is in our society (see also Achenbaum, 2015; Butler, 1969; Carlson, Black, Holley, & Coster, 2020; Levy, 2001; Palmore, 2001). But where does the public draw the line? Less is known about the acceptable limits of everyday ageism, and we explored them by examining reactions to the "calculated ageism" that represents a particularly extreme devaluation of older adults. Although our data were limited to tweets posted on a single day, they revealed overwhelming opposition to it, with the most common critiques centering on its immorality and its privileging of the economic interests of the powerful. These patterns reveal that ageism does indeed have boundaries, and these are shaped by core beliefs about fairness. They also are shaped by a bedrock conviction that older lives have value and older people are not expendable. The many tweets referencing parents and grandparents imply that tweeters were not uniformly older, and younger generations' opprobrium raises the possibility of cross-generational coalitions. This intergenerational solidarity could be leveraged to reduce ageism during the pandemic and beyond, perhaps via nonpartisan affirmations of support for welfare policies for older Americans (Binstock, 2010) or via new political coalitions (Earnest & Padavic, 2019) that focus attention on who benefits from calculated ageism.

References

Achenbaum, W.A. (2015). A history of ageism since 1969. *Generations*, *39*(1), 10-16.

Ayalon, L. (2020). There is nothing new under the sun: ageism and intergenerational tension
    in the age of the COVID-19 outbreak. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 1-4.
    doi 10.1017/S1041610220000575

Binstock, R. (2010). From compassionate ageism to intergenerational conflict? *The
    Gerontologist, 50*(5), 574-585. doi 10.1092/geront/gnq056

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code
    development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Butler, R.N. (1969). Age-ism: another form of bigotry. *The Gerontologist*, *9*(4, Part 1), 243-
    246. doi.org/10.1093/geront/9.4_Part_1.243

Carlson, K.J., Black, D.J., Holley, L.M., & Coster, D.C. (2020). Stereotypes of older adults:
    development and evaluation of an updated stereotype content and strength survey. *The
    Gerontologist, 60*(5), e347-e356. doi10.1093/geront/gnz061.

Cary, L.A., Chasteen, A.L., & Remedios, J. (2017). The ambivalent ageism scale: developing
    and validating a scale to measure benevolent and hostile ageism. *The Gerontologist*,
    57(2), e27-e36. doi 10.1093/geront/gnw118

Earnest, W., & Padavic, I. (2019). Survey research and the politics of old age welfare in a
    period of system crisis. *Theory in Action*, *12*(3), 79-104. doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-
    0237-1922

Ehni, H., & Wahl, H. (2020). Six propositions against ageism in the COVID-19 pandemic.
    Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 32(4-5), 515-525.
    doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2020.1770032

Fraser, S., Lagacé, M., Bongué, B., Ndeye, N., Guyot, J., Bechard, L., et al. (2020). Ageism

and COVID-19: what does our society's response say about us? *Age and Aging*, *00*(1-

4). doi 10.1093/ageing/afaa097

Levy, B. (2001). Eradication of ageism requires addressing the enemy within. *The*

Gerontologist, 41(5), 578-579. doi.org/10.1093/geront/41.5.578

Palmore, E. (2001). The ageism survey: first findings. *The Gerontologist*, *41*(5), 572-575.

doi.org/10.1093/geront/41.5.572

Previtali, F., Allen, L.D., & Varlamova, M. (2020). Not only the virus spread: the diffusion of

ageism during the outbreak of COVID-19. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 32*(4-5),

506-514. doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2020.1772002

Reynolds, L. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exposes limited understanding of ageism.

Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 32(4-5), 499-505,

doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2020.1772003

Setzfand, J., & Watson, M. (2015). Passive ageism and its effect on older adults' finances.

Generations, 39, 39-45.

Vale, M.T., Bisconti, T.L., & Sublett, J.F. (2020) Benevolent ageism: attitudes of

overaccommodative behavior toward older women. *The Journal of Social*

Psychology, 160(5), 548-558. doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2019.1695567

Table 1: Tweets Addressing Calculated Ageism

Position and Justification	Percentage of Tweets (n=188)
Opposition	90%
Justifications	
Moral critique	31%
Political-economic critique	26%
Assertion of older adults' worth	17%
Public health argument	9%
Support	5%
No Position	5%

Notes: Tweets posted on March 23, 2020 in response to Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick's suggestion of generational sacrifice; justifications for opposition were not mutually exclusive & some tweets included none.

Table 2: Top 10 Most Retweeted Calculated Ageism Tweets

Number of Retweets[a]	Position	Message
14300	none	Tx Lt Gov Dan Patrick says grandparents would be willing to die to save the economy for their grandchildren.
4700	oppose	Lt Gov Dan Patrick's comments about grandparents being willing to die for their grandchildren so the economy can get going again sums up Trump's America.
3800	none	Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick (R) was just on Fox saying he agrees with Trump. He cast it as an opportunity for seniors to sacrifice in order to keep the country intact for their grandchildren. "Let's get back to living... And those of us that are 70+, we'll take care of ourselves."
3100	oppose	My 94 year old grandfather is not a sacrifice. My daughter's 75 year old Papa is not a fucking sacrifice. He's her Papa, and my Dad. And Dan Patrick can fuck right off with his Logan's Run Death Panel bullshit.
2300	oppose	BREAKING: Tx Lt Gov Dan Patrick says that grandparents would be willing to die to save the economy for their grandchildren. Well, I'm not willing to watch my elderly friends and family die In order to avoid a recession. Who's with me?
2100	oppose	Texas Lt. Gov Dan Patrick has said on Fox New that "lots of" grandparents would be willing to die in order in to save the economy for their grandchildren.
1700	oppose	Imagine how morally bankrupt you have to be to be Dan Patrick.

1200	oppose	The truly scary thing about this is that Dan Patrick is expressing the sort of euphoria that comes when people surrender to a cult leader's thought-command. "My heart is lifted tonight by what I heard the president say."
1200	oppose	Texas Lt Gov Dan Patrick literally says grandparents should die to save our economy for our kids. Not only would millions of young people *also* die, but imagine the sociopathy of preferring mass death to bailing out working Americans.☹
1100	none	Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick suggested Monday night that he would rather die from the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus than see instability in the American economic system.

Notes: [a]Number of times retweeted between initial post on March 23, 2020 and April 24, 2020.