

Across the chasm? Towards intergenerational empathy and solidarity on climate change

Abstract

Climate change represents a fundamental challenge to humanity, yet solidarity to mitigate the issue remains elusive. This is thought to be due to differences between younger and older generations. Contrary to age-related stereotypes, I argue against this reputed ‘chasm’ between generations—pointing to a failure to understand people’s diverse perspectives and lived experiences of the issue. To overcome this, I suggest reconsidering the notion of solidarity to incorporate interpersonal ‘empathy’ as a stepping stone towards social connection, understanding, and collective action. Finally, some possible policy responses are offered to bridge critical research gaps as well as some new social initiatives aimed at fostering empathy and solidarity in families and across societies.

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Introduction

Climate change is a complex and contested issue across all areas of human life. Meanwhile, changing climates lead to shifts in cultures that undermines mitigative behaviours, disrupts the nature of social relations, and in turn affects people's wellbeing. This matters because our relations with others make up the fabric of societies.¹ Moreover, social relations in the form of solidarity—i.e. a shared sense of we-ness and action in support of others—is thought to be a crucial element to reproach global issues. Indeed, United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, renewed calls for a 'deepening of solidarity... taking into account our common humanity and each person's dignity, our diversity, and each person's capacity and need'.² Hindering this is the reality of diverse social worlds that bring people to varied perspectives in relation to their environments and climate change³. Popular narratives in media, academic, and political discourses have portrayed people from younger generations as either concerned and engaged in climate activism or immature and narcissistic while older generations are characterised as uncaring and selfish, or incapable and resistant to change. In this paper, I discuss these narratives in relation to empirical research that suggests a much more nuanced reality on the ground—far from intergenerational conflict on this issue. Furthermore, these characterisations are not harmless. Indeed, I discuss the ways that age-related stereotypes diminish the humanness of others to undermine social relations and solidarity between generations. To overcome this, I suggest 'relational empathy' as a useful way of supporting people to broach and accept differences and move forward together. Finally, I conclude with some potential policy recommendations that focus on critical research gaps as to the evolving nature of intergenerational relations, and the potential for social programs that explicitly foster empathy and solidarity in families and across societies.

Whether in families, workplaces, or elsewhere in communities, people of all ages maintain relations. Indeed, intergenerational relations are a vital basis for family life, as parents raise their children, passing on cultural knowledge, provide care for the vulnerable and elderly in later life. Moreover, as a function of being born into a certain time period, commonly referred to as a generation, provides formative experiences to create a collective identity.⁴ It is said that belonging to a certain generation goes some way to defining a person's values, attitudes, and behaviours on certain issues. Moreover, depending on their relative ages, generations are thought to be in competition (see e.g., a recent survey suggested that 'Millennials' and 'Baby Boomers' are in competition to define societal values, for access to resources, and the transfer of power from one

¹ Many social commentaries have argued the centrality of social relations at the heart of societies. For example, (Donati & Archer, 2015) view relations as the essence or fabric of social life that creates, sustains, and changes societies over time.

² See Our Common Agenda: report of the Secretary-General (United Nations, 2021) (p.14).

³ Pierre Bourdieu explains how social and cultural structures and individual agency interact to shape social life. For example, the notion of 'habitus'—i.e. social worlds a person inhabits are shaped in relations to others, environmental, political, historical, and other aspects (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For example, (Norgaard, 2011) explains this in culture and climate attitudes and behaviours; 'public nonresponse to global warming is produced through cultural practices of everyday life' (p.207).

⁴ For example, (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004) explain how cultural traumas come from the experience of major conflicts, natural disasters, and so on. Collective notions of trauma emerge from socially-constructed narratives that change the social order and collective identities. While, (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019) suggests the social dynamics of climate change could lead to cultural trauma—sadly, this might already be the case.

generation to another⁵). As cultures and societies shift and evolve, so too does the nature of intergenerational relations.⁶ Nonetheless, it is possible to see how the nature of relations within families, such as those between ‘Millennial’ emerging adults and ‘Baby Boomer’ parents, might translate into generalised perspectives towards others of those generations in a general sense.

Is there a chasm between generations on climate change?

To a large degree, climate change has been depicted as an intergenerational issue. A recent study in Australia looked at the characterisations of younger generations across academic publications and found categories including: innocence, vulnerability, inheriting the issue, alarmist, apathetic, narcissistic, or heroic protagonists⁷. Meanwhile, few studies have explicitly looked at discourse characterisations of older generations on climate change. Instead, it is possible to look towards older-age stereotypes in discourses and surveys that have sought to capture this perspective from various populations. These infer older generations to be less competent and ambivalent to averting issues such as climate change—with perspectives towards them becoming more negative in senior life-stages.⁸ Paradoxically, this generational chasm in attitudes and behaviours is not reflected in many empirical studies, especially those that employ exploratory qualitative methods or track people over time. For example, a recent study of migrant families in Australia found cultural, economic, and practical aspects influenced pragmatic sustainability attitudes and behaviours across generations⁹. Meanwhile, a ten-year study in New Zealand found that age has become less of a factor in shaping climate change attitudes and behaviours¹⁰. Another study looked at community realities vis-a-vis climate change discourses and found over-simplification of people’s perspectives that failed to reflect diversity even from neighbours living with the physical consequences of climate change.¹¹ It lends weight to the idea that some discourses erroneously polarise perspectives on this complex issue.¹²

⁵ See (Francioli, Danbold, & North, 2023) for details.

⁶ See (Vanderbeck & Worth, 2015) for an overview. While, (Yan, 2016) provides a fascinating three-decade study in rural China to highlight changes in the nature of social demographics, intergenerational relations, and solidarity (see p.253-254).

⁷ See (Jones, Davison, & Lucas, 2023) for details. Moreover, the authors highlight the role of social research in reproducing stereotypes as the basis for narratives that support 'dominant forms of social order' in societies (p.12).

⁸ For example, (Fernández-Ballesteros, Olmos, Pérez-Ortiz, & Sánchez-Izquierdo, 2020) used data from 54,545 participants in 29 European countries and found that less than half of respondents reported positive views towards people aged 70 years and above (see especially, pp.16–19).

⁹ (Khorana, 2024) provides insight into the nuances of relations within families where adults reported a sense of responsibility towards younger family members and their community generally, however, reporting climate-related choices that were pragmatic within familial needs, practicality, and economic limitations.

¹⁰ (Milfont, Zubielevitch, Milojević, & Sibley, 2021) analyse data from a ten-year longitudinal study of over 50,000 people in New Zealand and found age to be less of a factor in determining climate change awareness and concern. The authors point to a generation gap in the data because older age cohorts started from a lower initial belief in climate change (p.2).

¹¹ (Meyer & Sokolíčková, 2024) explored the experiences of a community in the high Arctic and found people to have differing perspectives towards the issue—despite facing physical environmental impacts of a changing climate. The authors highlight various impacts of insufficient characterisations within sections of the community (see p.13-14).

¹² Adversarial framing has long been a tactic of opposing sides of the climate change debate, see (Knight & Greenberg, 2011). (Raby & Sheppard, 2021) shows the prevalence of editorial narratives in Canada that evoke polarised generational relations.

Stereotypes, lesser humanness, and limits to solidarity

Stereotypes are far from harmless devices used to narrate a ‘good story’. Instead of representing people’s nuanced and diverse realities, stereotyping projects essentialist traits and behaviours through implicit biases based on limited or insufficient information of the other person.¹³ Psychologists suggest that stereotypes can support perceptions of others to have lesser moral standing or lesser competence than our own—or a combination of both¹⁴. This results in ambivalent prejudices such as pity, envy, or disgust. Moreover, recent research suggests this can manifest in subtle ways in everyday relations as ‘lesser humanness’.¹⁵ For example, consider a family discussion on climate change with adult children who suggest the installation of solar power to reduce the household’s power consumption, while older generation parents reject the idea citing a range of seemingly inconsequential reasons. If the parents’ refusal is perceived as a matter of incompetence or inability (i.e. ‘they’re too old to change’) and not born of deliberately immoral behaviours (i.e. ‘they’re selfish and don’t care about their impact on climate change’) such stereotypes might produce a perception of pity towards the parents. This scenario can be replicated in innumerable climate change-related contexts. The central point is that stereotypes bring assumptions without knowing a more complete range of reasons that drive attitudes and behaviours, both conscious and subconscious. To force the issue, some have suggested ‘climate shame’ as useful in persuading people to change.¹⁶ However, this is unlikely to lead to positive outcomes. Relations are undermined when people are perceived as ‘defective, objectionable, condemned’.¹⁷ These perceptions often lead to psychological distance from the issue and disengagement from others,¹⁸ reduce a sense of agency to change,¹⁹ and has been shown to adversely affect wellbeing.²⁰ Instead, a more pragmatic response to the realities of changing climates suggests a need to overcome anxiety, fear, and shame, and instead focus on reformulating social relations in a positive sense to cultivate transformation-orientated emotional responses to climate change.²¹ The latter perspective considers the practical realities of evolving social relations, along with changing climates. It seems like a reasonable proposition in the face of the corrosive forces of stereotypes that dehumanise and separate people.

¹³ See (Beeghly, 2015) for an overview of the nature of stereotypes and stereotyping in various contexts.

¹⁴ (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) show that stereotypes aimed at people different from oneself tend to imply differences in morality and competency, fostering prejudices and forms of dehumanisation. of pity or envy—and in extreme cases, the dehumanised perception of disgust. (Fiske, 2017) looks at the role of age and culture-related stereotypes.

¹⁵ See (Kteily & Landry, 2022) for an overview of the various forms of dehumanisation—from subtle to blatant. (Karantzas, Simpson, & Haslam, 2023) discuss potential for lesser humanness to exist within interpersonal and even ‘close’ relationships.

¹⁶ See these arguments in (Aaltola, 2021) and (Klimková, 2023).

¹⁷ See (Zahavi, 2014) for a discussion on shame, impacts on a sense of self, and our relation to others (see p.208-223).

¹⁸ (Chu & Yang, 2019) highlight the impacts of psychological distance on climate change. While, (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998) discuss intergenerational ambivalence and its relation to solidarity.

¹⁹ See (Haq, 2021) for an interesting discussion. (Ayalon & Roy, 2023) share findings from a preliminary study in Australia.

²⁰ See (Dionigi, 2015) for details.

²¹ (Verlie, 2022) argues a 'living-with' view of the issue: 'Climate as living-with focuses on the intimate ways we are entangled with the non-human world, and how the patterns of these relationships generate the conditions in which we live.' (p.5)

Might solidarity be more than an exchange between the likeminded?

Since its inception, the United Nations has been a leading advocate for global solidarity—seen as central in efforts to promote fairness, equity, justice and coordinated action on issues that affect people around the world.²² However, as progress in this regard has seemingly stalled, it is useful to consider the nature of solidarity. A common starting point is the work of Emile Durkheim, who explained ‘social solidarity’ as the coming together of people based on a shared sense of identification, beliefs, values, and a collective consciousness that supports cohesive group behaviours.²³ Durkheim thought that solidarity could be especially forthcoming when people come together in shared purpose, exchange, or mutual benefit. This manifests at various levels of social life, from within families to a global sense of common humanity. It follows that the ‘closer to home’ others are—i.e. our family or close communities—the easier it is to identify with their beliefs, values, and hence feel a sense of solidarity. In a similar vein, to explain solidarity between generations in families, notions of social capital, exchange, and reciprocal responsibility are commonplace.²⁴ This relies on alignment of views and consensus between people. I see this as problematic in the context of climate change—i.e. what happens when people have divergent views? For example, a grandparent might provide after-school care for their grandchildren and therefore produce ‘social capital’. Yet, their attitudes and behaviours on climate change are an unbridged issue in their relations with their adult children. In a similar scenario to the previous section, it is possible that lesser humanness is perceived and corrodes relations over time. There is no clear path for the accumulation of social capital or mutual exchange to bridge differences between people and foster solidarity on divisive issues. In a world with incredible diversity, this required sameness and consensus is not readily achieved or even desirable. Instead, there must be a way in common humanity.

Empathy, a stepping stone to solidarity in common humanity

As the world faces the effects of changing climates, there is an urgent need to bring people together despite differing perspectives. The natural starting point is empathy. For many proponents, present day ‘empathy’ lies far from the outdated notions of ‘walking in another’s shoes’ or as a limited ‘emotional response to another’s pain’²⁵. ‘Relational empathy’ (as it is commonly known) is an explanation of deeper social

²² In (United Nations, 2021) solidarity is defined as ‘a fundamental value by virtue of which global challenges must be managed in a way that distributes costs and burdens fairly, in accordance with basic principles of equity and social justice, and ensures that those who suffer or benefit the least receive help from those who benefit the most’ (p.14).

²³ See (Wilde, 2007) for an overview of solidarity. While, (Smith, 2020) provides a helpful summary of Durkheim’s two forms of solidarity including ‘mechanical solidarity’ between people of the same family or some other group with undifferentiated sense of collective identity—and ‘organic solidarity’ based on relations of people across more diverse societies. Durkheim thought organic solidarity might lead to ‘dynamic density’ i.e. increases in the number and frequency of interactions between people in societies—therefore increasing solidarity (see p.16-19). Sadly, this is yet to happen when it comes to climate change.

²⁴ An influential model by (Roberts, Richards, & Bengtson, 1991) posits that intergenerational solidarity has a basis in affectual, association, exchange, consensus, normative, and structural elements (p.18). This seems to assume a coherence within family beliefs, values, and attitudes. (Oosterlynck, Schuermans, & Loopmans, 2017) discuss developments in ‘social capital’ to highlight four sources of solidarity suggesting the need to better incorporate cultural diversity and place-based solidarity.

²⁵ See (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016) for an overview.

relations that enables people to broach and explore differences on any given issue.²⁶ This requires reflexive practice to separate one's own perspective while being open to another's understanding²⁷. The degree of difficulty increases as issues become more important to the individuals involved and perspectives more polarised. However, these ideas have been applied to confront and overcome engrained racism and other forms of prejudice.²⁸ Despite this potential, empathy is no panacea to the world's ills. For a start, the practice of empathy is not straightforward and works differently in diverse cultural contexts²⁹ and is impeded by social inequalities and power imbalances between people.³⁰ Furthermore, I see that empathy is sometimes projected as a normative or 'virtuous' act that instead renders the process as self-serving and reflective of a subtle form of oppression through the projection of one's own thoughts and ideas onto another—all in the name of 'empathy'. This is because empathy cannot be forced—it requires genuine 'pro-social' motivation from two people who want to understand each other.³¹ Nevertheless, more holistic relational notions of empathy explain and counter these challenges. It requires an interdisciplinary reading of empathy and practical experience working with people across social and cultural diversities—i.e. becoming proficient requires learning 'on-the-job' through practice in real life. Ultimately, these efforts form components of richer connections between people as they reflect real perspectives, give insight into real lived experiences, and therefore overcome antiquated stereotypes and other generalised characterisations. At the same time, relations that broach and accept people's unique perspectives offer respect and recognition of others as a significant fellow human in the world.³² I see this as an important stepping stone in situations when people are very different from each other, on a particular issue or in terms of fundamental worldviews, and therefore, consensus is out of reach.³³ Indeed, 'being heard' is a positive move towards overcoming engrained stereotypes and seeing beyond differences³⁴. This offers a more humanistic conceptualisation of solidarity as a non-materialistic form of exchange that is available between anyone in common humanity. Meanwhile, there are some who push back against this idea of empathy between people with significantly different perspectives, beliefs, and worldviews—i.e. is it even possible to understand someone so different?

²⁶ See (Betzler, 2019), (Eklund & Meranius, 2020) and (Main, Walle, Kho, & Halpern, 2017) for interesting discussions.

²⁷ (Maibom, 2022) explains: 'many people are sceptical about the possibility of taking another's perspective. The problem is that doing so seems to require an act of identification. The worry is that such identification turns into mere projection, so that we don't actually end up understanding the other at all...'. This comes from 'a profound misunderstanding of what we are aiming for in adopting another's point of view. It is not to become fully identified with that person. Instead, it is to make sense of them from a standpoint between ourselves and them'. (see pp.19–20).

²⁸ See examples from post-apartheid South Africa (Field, 2017) and racism in the U.S. (Givens, 2021) calling for a 'critical' focus on self-reflexive practices to understand one's positionality, origin and form of biases, and intersubjective experience.

²⁹ See (Wiltshire, 2021) for a brief discussion. While, (Hollan & Throop, 2008) explored the vastly differing ways that empathy-like relations are practiced and interpreted in diverse cultural settings around the world.

³⁰ See (Zaki & Cikara, 2015) for details.

³¹ (Zaki, 2014) highlights the role of 'pro-social' motivations for empathy—i.e. intentions to engage for the benefit of others.

³² (Thijssen, 2012) suggests Durkheim's 'organic solidarity' can be considered 'empathic solidarity' as it requires people to recognise and accept differences (e.g. 'you are not like me but nevertheless I understand and respect you') (p.459).

³³ Intergenerational dialogue is often proposed to bridge generational differences and find 'middle ground' e.g. see (Hayes et al., 2023). In cases where consensus is not possible, we are stuck in the same quagmire unable to move forward.

³⁴ See (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012) for details.

Notwithstanding, I contend that anyone can indeed form meaningful relations to understand one another to some degree. This idea comes from a decade of working with people of all ages and facilitating relations across diverse cultures. Fundamental to this is a connection to others in common humanity³⁵. It is not about convincing others to change—this may or may not happen as a function of meaningful relations over time. With this view, whatever complexity of attitudes towards issues that appear at the surface unravel to a point where trust, respect, and care supports solidarity in common humanity.

Policy implications: research to understand the realities of social relations on climate change

In this paper, I have discussed aspects of social relations that I argue are critical to solidarity between generations. To move forward on this issue, I suggest policy responses require a stronger foundational understanding of people's perspectives towards and experiences with other generations, especially those with differing attitudes and behaviours towards climate change—i.e. 'knowledge itself is power' as Francis Bacon intimated. In this case, power to change the status quo. A further hindrance is that many existing studies are positivistic in design and therefore not open to unexpected findings and instead reproduce stereotypes³⁶. Well-designed qualitative studies are better placed for this purpose. However most large-scale existing studies focus on environmental changes in communities, whilst overlooking the dynamics of interpersonal relations³⁷. Also, there is a distinct need for interdisciplinary research that connects across natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities³⁸. These data are needed to get to the heart of issue so that efforts are well-directed to inspire solidarity between generations. While research programs take time to implement, in the meantime there is much that can be done to advance a relational agenda on this issue.

Policy implications: social initiatives that support empathy and solidarity within families and across societies

As I have outlined, the issue of intergenerational solidarity on climate change is complex, and therefore does not lend itself to a singular solution. With this in mind, there is an urgent need to spark creative grassroots ideas with the explicit purpose of bringing people together towards solidarity. This would require the creation of a global platform for social relational innovation—to engage people around the world and foster localised solutions in people's own communities. There are no limits on the creativity that is possible! Moreover, there are many ways to facilitate innovation, such as 'human-centred' approaches that have risen to prominence in the past decade or so.³⁹ This cannot happen without regional or global multilateral advocacy to motivate and facilitate participation. With this first step supporting grassroots participation, there is a distinct need to

³⁵ In a pilot study, I explored perspectives relating to empathy that resulted from a seven-year collaboration between communities in India and students from Australia (Wiltshire, 2023). People felt a strong connection in many cases, despite differences in age, culture, etc. This came from engagement in everyday cultural life—i.e. 'interaction rituals' (Collins, 1981). Also, reflexive practice supports a recognition and acceptance of differences on issues relating to health, education, and so on.

³⁶ (Capstick, Whitmarsh, Poortinga, Pidgeon, & Upham, 2015) and (Jamieson, 2020) are among those highly critical of positivistic research on climate change that ignores the complexities of people's experiences in the world.

³⁷ (Beckwith et al., 2023) suggests that relatively little is known about the nature and content of intergenerational relations within changing environments. While, (Yarker, 2021) calls for understanding everyday interactions between generations.

³⁸ See (Schipper, Dubash, & Mulugetta, 2021) and (Elixhauser et al., 2024) for details.

³⁹ See (Kelley & Kelley, 2013) for an engaging discussion on human-centred approaches to innovation.

foster connection and understanding between people with differing perspectives around the world. This might sound too grand of a challenge; however, I firmly see this is possible when a multi-layered approach is considered. There are many studies that support the idea of empowering and connecting diverse voices from all walks of life, social and cultural backgrounds. For example, personal stories and real-life narratives have been shown to be persuasive in engaging people on the issue of climate change.⁴⁰ In a practical sense, there are various forms of media and technologies that make it possible to engage people *en masse*. While this is a good starting point, I suggest taking this further to encourage human-to-human relations that are not mediated via technologies to create more substantial and even transformative impacts. For sure this is difficult but so has been decades of limited success towards solidarity on climate change! People of all generations need tangible and productive ways to discuss and broach differences on climate change, and guidance on work towards empathy-like understanding. This can begin within families. For example, I foresee the potential of a tool kit developed to support meaningful intergenerational dialogues within families. This should be created with wide cultural relational perspectives in mind—something that the United Nations is best placed to facilitate. In addition, these concepts can be adapted for institutions for higher learning around the world. Universities are well placed to embed relevant concepts within general curriculums and extra-curricular student programs. Indeed, attending tertiary education is a time when people are more open to learning new ideas—this makes an ideal environment to take on the challenge of empathic understanding across perspectival differences. Student groups can be energised to promote engagement with globally advocated programs—we have seen this with many United Nations initiatives. Across a decade of work in Australia, Japan, and India, I have seen firsthand the promise and impact of facilitating meaningful partnerships between university students and members of their communities. With multilateral advocacy and funding it is possible to create this eco-system of intergenerational solidarity—powered by communities and enabled through global and regional coordination.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the purported ‘chasm’ between people of different ages is more so a function of age-related stereotypes than an entrenched and generalisable difference in attitudes and behaviours on climate change. For this, I have shown how stereotypes can undermine social relations, as others who are different are viewed with lesser humanness, or other forms of dehumanisation. To move forward, I have suggested a need to reconsider the notion of solidarity to allow for people to come together, despite individual differences. Indeed, relational empathy is a means to approach the issue. From this I have drawn a series of recommendations that seek to close research gaps on the nature of intergenerational relation and create a global social relational innovation movement. At its heart would be a global program to give voice to people’s perspectives on the issue, with tools for families and other individuals to engage others with empathy, along with engagement and support for universities to champion these ideas in their communities.

⁴⁰ See (Gustafson et al., 2020) for details. (Morton, 2021) shares an example from Australia. (Brown et al., 2019) suggests narratives for empathy that focuses on place and individual identities—that seems aligned to 'habitus' mentioned earlier.

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