

The CSU Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change

Volume 1 *The CSU Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change: Conference Proceedings*

Article 7

2021

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APA Citation

Hess, P. M., & McNairn, S. M. (2022). From Blame to Dialogue: In Quest of Intergenerational Respect on Climate Sustainability. *The CSU Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change*, 1(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55671/2771-5574.1007>

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From Blame to Dialogue: In Quest of Intergenerational Justice on Climate Sustainability

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Abstract

Conversations about rapid climate disruption can become side-tracked by blame-seeking: who or what nations or cultures or age brackets are most responsible for global warming? This paper seeks to move beyond blame and uncover the importance of fostering solidarity among generations to uncover our shared responsibility for climate sustainability. By understanding the intersectional context of how past injustices inordinately impacted various communities, we can move towards constructive dialogue and shared practical experiences to foster justice among generations. The Three R's of Equitable Intergenerational Development can initiate this, which strives to mitigate transgenerational climate injustices. Through intergroup contact, intergenerational respect seeks to mitigate climate disruption and emphasize a more equitable and inclusive political, economic, social, and natural environment among all generations.

How do Generational Perspectives Differ on Climate Disruption?

It is a common trope to speak as if each generation is its own discrete entity reflecting oppositional attitudes to other generations. Human culture is of course far more dynamic than this, but generational experiences do shape our contrasting perceptions of the seriousness of key issues. An 85-year-old with numerous grandchildren will view human overpopulation differently than a millennial agonizing over whether to have children at all. Serious engagement with climate disruption requires that we abandon our aged-based silos and embrace intergenerational dialogue and cooperation.

The twin roots of climate disruption are resource overconsumption and human overpopulation: too many humans consume too much in the way of land, energy, and finite resources.

The current climate catastrophe stems from a history of Western industrial development that has greatly benefitted the present generation at the expense of future generations (Davies, 2020). Our descendants will bear the environmental costs of the conveniences we enjoy, implying a lack of awareness on our part of the intergenerational solidarity necessary to help us envision long-term solutions. Will the changes in policy and practice necessary to address overconsumption be made equitably between generations?

How Might We Assess Intergenerational Contact on Climate Issues?

Climate disruption is an intersectional systemic issue. It is a result of both (1) scientific ignorance leading to the abuse and unraveling of Earth's delicate ecosystems, and (2) a capital-

ist-industrial model premised upon the assumption of eternal economic growth that rejects the integral relationship between economy and ecology (Daly & Cobb, 1994). Addressing the causes and consequences of climate disruption requires recognizing intersections of generations, genders, ethnicities, religions, nationalities, socioeconomic levels, and geographical contexts. In observing the current polarization on climate issues, research reveals that “70% of adults aged 18 to 34 say they worry about global warming compared to 56% of those aged 55 or older” (Ballew et al., 2019). Based on observing interactions between different generational cohorts, how might we assess the ways in which individuals participate in efforts to mitigate climate change?

One fruitful way to explore intergenerational contact is to look at how access to educational resources on climate science changes the dialogue. Children’s early exposure to the scientific treatment of climate issues can generate conversations that extend from schools into households. Similarly, open dialogue and shared practical experiences of healing the land create constructive empathy. The wisdom and experience of age complement and enrich the dynamism and imagination of youth to enable us to build an integrated vision and plan of action for addressing the multifaceted challenge of climate disruption.

What are the Three Rs of Equitable Intergenerational Development?

As climate disruption accelerates, equitable intergenerational development is one key to ensuring ecological stability for future generations. According to Sultana (2021), “the lived experiences of climate injustices demonstrate the differential marginalisations occurring among and within communities” (p. 120). Through the processes of recognition, reprioritization, and reconciliation, we can address environmental injustices more inclusively with unified plans for developing and implementing transgenerational solutions.

First, since we are applying a model of intergenerational development to climate issues, we should *recognize* that economic development in the United States often doomed places to become uninhabitable sacrifice zones (Lerner, 2010). The National Housing Act (1934) formed the Federal Housing Administration whose color-coded maps suggested varying levels of risk across communities. The red or “hazardous” zones in which home loans were denied were disproportionately inhabited by families of color. Today, these neglected neighborhoods can be 5 to 20 degrees hotter in the summer than the more affluent, whiter neighborhoods of the same city. This is due to a lack of trees and an abundance of heat-trapping pavement

(Plumer & Popovich, 2020). Without taking the appropriate actions now, these neighborhoods will further devolve into uninhabitable heat-emitting scars exacerbating the effects of a warming climate on future generations.

Second, in the context of these social inequalities that plague generations, we can *reprioritize* areas of investment to ensure an equally sustainable future for all. Emphasizing urban greenery, cool materials, and shading to mitigate urban heat will save energy and keep cities cooler for generations (Yenneti et al., 2017).

The third step in this tripartite model involves actively *reconciling* disparities and moving to a greener new deal. Islam (2015) contends that, social inequality shapes behavior within and between households, communities, and nations, each of which influences environmental sustainability. Pursuing multilateral development in such a way that promotes uniform expansion among all communities will support future generations. Organizations such as the Sunrise Movement accentuate the intersectionality of historical neglect and climate issues. It supports a climate action plan which seeks to generate green jobs and reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2030 (Green New Deal, 2019). Active reconciliation of inequalities over time can influence behavior that fosters solidarity among generations on environmental sustainability.

What Sacrifices Are Required of Different Generations for Climate Sustainability?

If voluntary population reduction fails, nature will trim our excess through famine, resource wars, epidemics, and forced ecological migration. This raises questions in intergenerational ethics: can a young couple decide that they cannot responsibly have children? What considerations of intergenerational justice are raised, such as obligations to future generations (Gosseries & Meyer, 2009)? How might religious traditions engage with delicate questions about population (Hess, 2019)? How will an aging population be cared for? What intergenerational and intercultural sensitivities on issues of reproductive justice are raised between the global south and the global north (Eriksen, 2015)?

Implementing Intergenerational Justice and Climate Sustainability

Mitigating the effects of climate change will require a cooperative approach in that everyone will be better off working together. Intergenerational climate issues range from protecting the interests of unborn generations in Colombia who risk in-

heriting a failing Amazonian Rainforest to representing elderly women in Switzerland who are more vulnerable to increasing temperatures (Slobodian, 2020). Emphasizing restorative justice for underrepresented communities promotes intergenerational solidarity on climate sustainability by inspiring common interests and shared responsibility. A unified pursuit of intergenerational equity remains necessary in considering sustainable solutions and a livable future for all.

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