

New research looks at intergenerational tensions, Gen Z as coming change agents

November 8 2022, by Liz Mineo



Harvard professor of sociology Michèle Lamont and Adrienne Liesl Chan '25 discuss the similarities and differences between baby boomers and Generation Z. Credit: Kris Snibbe/Harvard Staff Photographer

In her forthcoming book "Who Matters: How to Redefine Worth in Our

Divided World," Michèle Lamont, professor of sociology and of African and African American studies and the Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies, studies intergenerational values and tensions and the role of Generation Z as agents of change and their desire to create a more inclusive society.

To understand how the views and values of Gen Z (those born after 1997) compare to those of baby boomers (born between 1945–1960), the Gazette interviewed Lamont, a boomer herself, and Adrienne Liesl Chan '25, a Gen Z, who took part in the book's research through the Bliss Program, which pairs [students](#) with faculty to engage in [social science research](#).

GAZETTE: What are the most salient characteristics of Generation Z?

LAMONT: They come of age in the context of growing inequality, under COVID, and during a major mental health crisis, especially for their generation. But they have hope, not necessarily in the idea of being successful professionally or economically, but in the idea of creating a society that allows them to bring their best self or their whole self to their life. That means in part allowing people to be who they want to be, whether it is in terms of sexual orientation or expressing their ethno-racial identity. That is a quite huge contrast with the boomers.

CHAN: As a Gen Z myself, I'd add that we have experienced most of our [social life](#) on the internet. When it comes to narratives of hope, but also how we represent ourselves to other people, a lot of that is based on how we perceive ourselves on the internet.

GAZETTE: Between which groups—Gen Z, baby boomers, and millennials—do you see the greatest

intergenerational contrast?

LAMONT: The contrast is strongest between Gen Z and the boomers. I'm a boomer, and we grew up in a time when many had middle-class parents who experienced upward mobility and a belief that the American dream would give you a membership through consumption; you would get a house and raise your family. It involved a lot of conformism in terms of following a script of what our lives were supposed to be like.

For Gen Z, as well as millennials (born between 1981–1997), that dream is not realistic. They are both very attuned to growing inequality. Millennials came of age with the 2008 recession, and they found it hard to find a footing in the labor market. Many in Gen Z have yet to really enter the labor market. When we interviewed them, they were still students; they have not fully faced the wall of economic integration, but half of our sample of [college students](#) were less privileged and reported struggles during the pandemic; they faced the challenge of helping their parents pay their bills or struggled to cover their expenses.

GAZETTE: What are your views on millennials?

CHAN: There's this growing trend of Gen Z making fun of millennials for their style, but at the same time, I find that we have a lot more in common with millennials than with baby boomers, in terms of attitudes toward work. There's this overarching assumption that millennials and Gen Z are lazy, but we both prioritize our well-being over achievement. Like other generations, we both have the drive to achieve and find worth in work, but the priority is our well-being.

LAMONT: One of the big differences among generations is the environment. Both millennials and Gen Z think that the boomers really messed up with the environment. We thought we were extremely

progressive; we did the gender revolution, the sexual revolution. My sense is that Gen Z overlooks how deep those changes were and also how brave my generation was in creating social change. They blame us for having been selfish and not attuned enough to the dangers of the destruction of the environment, which is extremely salient for them to the point where some say they don't want to have children because they're too conscious of what's going to happen with the planet.

GAZETTE: Do you agree, Adrienne? Did boomers botch stewardship of the environment?

CHAN: I would agree with Professor Lamont's view: the environment and climate change.

Gen Z has a critical opinion of baby boomers. One thing that recently emerged was the meme "OK, boomer," which was a Gen Z's response to dismiss or mock boomers. A lot of people in my generation believe that [baby boomers](#) were passive and complicit in a lot of the issues that we're facing now. We also think that in matters of race, it's not enough to say that you're not racist, like many boomers say. We believe that you must be anti-racist and that you have to actively advocate for change.

GAZETTE: Professor Lamont, what positive aspects do you see in Gen Z?

LAMONT: Well, it's complicated. It's an age group that defines their own identity, partly in contrast to their parents' generation. I should say, though, that the book is focused in part on Gen Z, but we study them as agents of change because they are tracing out the future for us. The other half of the book is drawing on what we call the "change agents," or people who are providing new narratives to help us imagine the future at a time when the U.S. is in crisis. This includes over 180 stand-up comics,

Hollywood creatives, activists, and philanthropists.

We use the label Gen Z with a great deal of care and with reservations given the criticisms addressed to the concept of cohort, but we think it's legitimate to use it because this is a group that defines itself as having a strong "cohort identity." They talk about themselves as Gen Z all the time, and for them, this means focus on inclusion and anti-racism and being kind. This is a huge difference with my generation. When we talked about politics, we didn't talk at all about kindness or the idea that you should not be an ass in your daily interactions.

GAZETTE: Your research includes interviews with a sample of 80 college students living in the Midwest and the East Coast, who qualify as Gen Z, before and after the pandemic. How did the pandemic affect the students you interviewed?

LAMONT: Half of the sample are students we call privileged because they are children of the upper-middle class, college-educated professionals, and managers. The other half are less privileged because their parents don't have a college degree and have always experienced crises upon crises. For example, during COVID their situation was aggravated, but it's not like life was easy before, but they may have been asked to spend more of their time helping their families, whether it is daycare or contributing to pay bills.

With grad students Mari Sanchez and Shira Zilberstein, we show in a separate article that for the more privileged students, one of the impacts of COVID is that they redefined their professional goals more in collective terms; they became more committed to trying to make a difference in society by volunteering and pursuing altruistic goals. Paradoxically, these students, whose parents are paying their bills, seem

unaware of how their own life conditions allow them to do more volunteerism.

This doesn't happen as much with the working-class students, in part because they must attend to many emergencies and the goal of getting a profession that will allow them to pay their bills remains extremely salient. At the same time, more of the working-class students we interviewed are people of color and feel a deep commitment to addressing Black Lives Matter issues.

Another big difference across the two class-groups that we've studied is that while the upper- middle class students put emphasis on being a "nice human," the working-class kids believe that niceness is very limited in how much change it can produce, and that sometimes you need confrontation, "calling out," or "hard conversations."

CHAN: Another difference within Gen Z is that there are people who feel very hopeful about the future, but there are others who are very pessimistic, who almost feel like there's no use in doing anything because of growing inequality and the apocalyptic scenario of climate change. Many people feel that there is no point in trying to make change when it takes so long, and because we don't know how terrible climate change will be in several years from now.

GAZETTE: What are Gen Z's values and concerns? What is their version of the American dream?

LAMONT: That generation has not yet fully hit the labor market, but they are aware of the dangers of precarity, and the rising cost of higher education, health care, and housing. Realistically, it's much harder for them to imagine one day having enough money to buy a house or to raise a family the way that some of them were raised in a suburban house.

They don't put their money on their ability to realize this dream; instead they want to create a better society through inclusion.

It's a generation that has been described as over-conformist and pushed by their families to be competitive because of families' concerns about being downwardly mobile. Families have pushed their children to succeed, and the children are extremely anxious. There are surveys that show a steady increase in how much freshmen have become increasingly overwhelmed and anxious, which underscores the mental health crisis this generation has experienced.

In response to that pressure, the alternative is to have a life that allows them to live authentically, the way they want to be. There are two versions of the self in conflict: the neoliberal version, which is be self-reliant, competitive, and eager to make money, and the other is more about self-actualization, which allows them to be all they want to be, not only on the professional dimension, but all dimensions. Many believe in having a balanced life, which the workaholic versions of the boomers didn't believe in.

CHAN: A lot of my older peers talk about work-life balance, and that has become more of a prominent feature of our conversations as we get older. Coming from the pandemic, we often ask ourselves, "Is it really worth sacrificing our mental health for some sort of achievement or material gain?"

On the flip side, we're constantly pushed to follow along with these trends. College students feel this need to be self-sufficient, enter the workforce and make as much money as their parents, if not more, so that they can continue to support a lifestyle that they see on TikTok or on some other form of social media. But at the same time, we think, "What is the moral value of working in very lucrative professions?" or "What do I have to change about myself to be successful or to continue upward

mobility?" Those two things are constantly in conflict.

GAZETTE: Who inspires Generation Z?

LAMONT: We asked that question and the names that are most often mentioned were people like Greta Thunberg, but also Bernie Sanders, people who are really questioning the current social order. The second main category after the activists were the artists, for instance Lizzo, who is very affirming of body positivity, and someone like Colin Kaepernick in sports. They're all people who through their activities are sending messages about what the alternative society should be like. No businessman is mentioned, and that's quite symptomatic of what they're aspiring to.

Gen Z are themselves agents of change in the sense that they want to create their own story, which is very different than the story of their parents' generation. But they are also turning toward these cultural creators to find alternative messages that recognize diversity of identity, whether it is for a marginalized ethno-racial group or for LGBTQ. They very much embrace the notion that people should be who they want to be.

CHAN: I remember seeing Greta Thunberg, a young person challenging all these CEOs at conferences and traveling across the world, and that was a very formative experience for me. There are other influencers who are not members of Gen Z, besides Greta Thunberg. For instance, Bernie Sanders, but he is such a timeless figure.

Lizzo or Beyoncé are not in our generation, but they're still pushing narratives that are very important to young people. But I would advocate for a movement away from individual figures to more of a collectivist model of activism, where it's not just hoping to be uplifted by that one person, but by all of us collectively discussing these issues first and

deciding to be active and putting a lot of these narratives to work.

GAZETTE: What are Gen Z's hopes for the future?

LAMONT: What captures their hopes is the creation of a more inclusive society, where people can be who they want to be. But if inequality prevents many people from being upwardly mobile, then instead of having only one metric to evaluate people's worth, which is how much money you make and how professionally successful you are, in fact, we should have a great many criteria by which we evaluate people's worth. That would include how much you care for others, what you give to communities, but also your value as an artist, as a spiritual person.

In social sciences, a great deal has been written about how to make societies more equal. This book is about how to make societies more inclusive through the narratives through which groups are perceived. Generation Z are carriers of social change. They're young; it's an age group that historically hasn't been voting very much, but it's very important that they show up and vote. The demographic shift in the country is crucial in producing social change, and their voice is important.

CHAN: I agree with all of that. I'd say that a lot of the pessimism comes from the shock of the past that influences how we view the present. What is most helpful to me is to think about how the present affects the future. We recognize the power of voting, but also that there are things within our own individual decision-making that are important for effecting change. For example, knowing that you have agency to create inclusive environments around you, not to say that it should be a burden for you, but if you feel hopeless in this period of uncertainty, then that it is within your own agency and within your own power to make decisions to recognize others that promote social change. I think that's a very inspiring message.

This story is published courtesy of the [Harvard Gazette](#), Harvard University's official newspaper. For additional university news, visit [Harvard.edu](#).

Provided by Harvard Gazette

Citation: New research looks at intergenerational tensions, Gen Z as coming change agents (2022, November 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-11-intergenerational-tensions-gen-agents.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.