Social Sciences & Humanities Open 2 (2020) 100085

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Sciences & Humanities Open

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssaho

#StayHomeForGrandma – Towards an analysis of intergenerational solidarity and responsibility in the coronavirus pandemic

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Age
Aging
Coronavirus
Solidarity
Responsibility
Intergenerational relations

ABSTRACT

In times of the coronavirus pandemic, many public statements appeal to intergenerational solidarity and responsibility. To clarify the normative implications of such appeals, we provide an overview of the concepts and their use in current media discourses. Mutual moral expectations between older and younger generations are (re-)negotiated. A closer sociological and moral philosophical analysis is necessary to understand the "moral economy" of intergenerational relations and the legitimacy of the claims involved.

1. Introduction: "No hugs for grandma"?

In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, solidarity and responsibility have become central normative points of reference in political statements, press conferences, and public media discourses. Germany may be a particularly striking example. Thus, at the beginning of the pandemic, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier emphasized that solidarity "is the task of the hour" (Kaschel, 2020). The German Health Minister Jens Spahn appealed "to the public's sense of personal responsibility" (Kaschel, 2020). And in her already famous speech on March 18, Chancellor Angela Merkel said: "I truly believe that we will succeed in the task before us, so long as all the citizens of this country understand that it is also THEIR task […] I also want to tell you why all of you are needed here, and what each and every individual can do to help" (Merkel, 2020). In a similar vein, 'solidarity' and 'responsibility' are also explicit guiding concepts of ethical policy advice as the German Ethics Council's ad hoc recommendations "Solidarity and Responsibility during the Coronavirus Crisis" (2020) show.

In many of these appeals, special attention is given to a group considered to be particularly vulnerable: older people. The strict measures initiated to limit the further spread of the virus and 'flatten the curve' – isolation, 'social distancing', the lockdown – are frequently being justified to the general population with the need to protect older and very old people. The younger generation is asked to accept restrictions of freedom and to make economic sacrifices out of solidarity with and responsibility for their older fellow citizens. For example, the WHO Regional Director for Europe states that while older adults have a significantly higher risk of serious or even fatal disease progression (the over 60s represent 95% of all deaths), people of all ages "need to act in solidarity" and "supporting and protecting older people living alone in the community is everyone's business" (Kluge, 2020). Indeed, these appeals are widely welcomed and a wave of overwhelming helpfulness has surged. There are countless initiatives to protect older people from infection and to support them in their daily lives. Examples are New York's Invisible Hands (2020) and initiatives of scout associations, e.g., of the FNEL Scouts and Guides (2020) in Luxembourg. At the same time, the failure of younger people to live up to these moral expectations is denounced as selfish and reckless, as in the case of so-called lockdown parties (The Guardian, 2020).

At first sight, this appears like a reversal of the previous discursive paradigm of intergenerational relations. Only weeks before, the media had been dominated by coverage on young *Fridays for Future*-activists who had blamed the older generation for the ecological consequences of their allegedly selfish and irresponsible lifestyle (e.g. Stromberg, 2019). Indeed, ageist stereotypes of egoistic 'Boomers' as well as a polemic rhetoric of a 'battle of generations' have long played into public discourses on intergenerational relations, especially in some contributions to the debates on environmental issues, social security, and public

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2020.100085
Received 29 April 2020; Received in revised form 8 November 2020; Accepted 9 November 2020
Available online 27 November 2020
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healthcare (Katz & Whitehouse, 2017; Bristow, 2015). Of course, the current appeals to solidarity and responsibility with the old also show a somewhat paradoxical twist: Solidarity – traditionally a notion of close and deep human relationships – is to be realized through its very opposite, 'social distancing'. We are called upon to stand together by standing alone. Thus, hashtag campaigns like #StayHomeForGrandma (twitter.com) are launched while at the same time media reports raise the concern that "No hugs for Grandma" (Lee, 2020) can lead to social isolation. Indeed, it has been pointed out that visiting restrictions can exacerbate problems of loneliness and isolation, especially in care homes and for people with dementia (Kluge, 2020). Furthermore, they are also criticized as paternalistic since they aim to protect the well-being of older people without letting them decide for themselves whether they want to take risks (Bascaramurty, 2020).

At the same time, a counter-discourse is emerging. The longer the exceptional situation persists, the more the social and economic costs and limits of solidarity with and responsibility for the old are brought to bear. In debates on the prioritization of scarce intensive care resources, proposals for age-based rationing of ventilators expect them to put aside their vital needs for the sake of younger patients (Gandhi & Patel, 2020). On a public health level, many commentators suggest that a general isolation of older people would be a more effective and less harmful policy strategy than a total lockdown that threatens the economy and thus the future of the younger generations. In contrast to most European countries, Sweden explicitly pursued a strategy of herd immunity, allowing the middle-aged population and children to continue their everyday lives and isolating vulnerable groups such as older people (Ellyatt, 2020). Similar strategies were also promoted in the UK or Poland. A Texas lieutenant governor even went as far as to declare that older people would be happy to sacrifice themselves for the future of their grandchildren and the US economy (Beckett, 2020). Indeed, well-known ageist stereotypes are resurfacing that frame old age as a feeble state unworthy of protection, for example the notion that the old are a burden and do not contribute to society (Ayalon et al., 2020).

These selected examples point to a general trend. In the discourse on the mutual expectations and obligations of older and younger people in times of the coronavirus, ideas of (old) age and intergenerational solidarity and responsibility are invoked and (re-)negotiated under the imminent threat of the pandemic. The pertinent controversies bear strong normative implications with regard to the human life course, the cycle of generations and the fundamental moral constitution of modern societies. At the same time, however, they also show manifold ambiguities and conflicting tendencies. Thus, in order to understand what is at stake in these debates and to discuss the acceptability of the respective claims, the meaning of concepts of solidarity and responsibility in public discourse needs closer examination. To this end, the following contribution outlines the theoretical framework for a discourse analysis that combines the socio-empirical examination of specific uses of these concepts in media or policy statements with the moral philosophical analysis of their normative presuppositions and implications. By spelling out their inherent moral structure, this descriptive ethical discourse analysis can prepare the ground for an open and transparent discussion of the significance, legitimacy, and tenability of appeals to intergenerational solidarity and responsibility in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

2. Young for old – old for young? Intergenerational solidarity and responsibility in times of the coronavirus

The controversial character of the ongoing debates on old age and intergenerational solidarity and responsibility is hardly surprising. 'Solidarity' and 'responsibility' are notoriously vague and ambiguous concepts. Each of them has a long, complicated history involving quite heterogeneous traditions of moral and political thought and practice. Both can be considered thick concepts with closely entwined descriptive and normative implications regarding individual roles and social relations.

First traces of modern understandings of solidarity can be found in the Christian tradition of fraternity and the notion of a universal community of all people in god's creation (Bayertz & Boshammer, 2008). Closely connected to the idea of *fraternité* in the French revolution, the concept unfolds substantial impact in the francophone world (Sternø, 2005; Ter Meulen, 2017, pp. 30–70). Émile Durkheim (2013) prominently distinguished mechanical solidarity based on shared traditions, life worlds, and values in archaic societies, from organic solidarity in specialized and thus more individualized societies. A similar perspective can be identified in Léon Bourgeois' notion of a natural solidarity that connects all human beings across space and time due to their interdependence and necessitates a 'quasi social contract' to regulate resulting reciprocal obligations (Bourgeois, 2020; Ter Meulen, 2017, pp. 44–47). This entanglement of normative and descriptive aspects is also manifest in another prominent context: the labor movement and its idea of the working class as a community with a shared destiny that fights for an improvement of its precarious situation (Bayertz & Boshammer, 2008).

Notwithstanding these different historical origins and semantic specifications, a number of overarching conceptual elements of solidarity can be identified. Thus, the concept refers to a specific solidarity group that is constituted by relevant similarities and/or interdependences of its members. In a solidary action, they stick together and support each other in order to overcome an identified social defect or restriction through collective action. Accordingly, a general moral philosophical definition characterizes solidarity in terms of "shared practices reflecting a collective commitment to carry 'costs' (financial, social, emotional, or otherwise) to assist others" (Prainsack & Buyx, 2011, p. 46). Taking the different elements of this definition as a first starting point and basic conceptual framework, a number of critical questions must be raised regarding the actual use of the concept in current discourses on the coronavirus pandemic.

A first important aspect is the relation to a *group*. Solidarity always refers to a community, a specific collective based on certain similarities. Usually, this collective is conceptualized as particulate and therefore presupposes processes of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, Richard Rorty argues that solidarity can unfold its force only when it is based on a 'we' that is constituted as distinct from another 'we' or rather a 'they' (Rorty, 1989). In the present debate, however, this solidary 'we' usually remains vague. Often neither the extent and composition nor the common ground of the solidarity group is clear. Of course, there are attempts to create a homogeneous 'we' across the generations and thus a basis for intergenerational solidarity. For example, the Regional Director of the WHO for Europe calls for solidarity with older people by stressing the risk of severe disease progressions as a similarity of people of all ages (Kluge, 2020). This suggests a common realm of (possible) experience: Younger and older people are alike as they share the same vulnerability. However, it might be difficult to identify with a common vulnerability when in fact it is quite unevenly distributed and may affect some only indirectly. Hence, the possibility to justify public-health measures in pandemics with appeals to solidarity may be rather limited (Prainsack & Buyx, 2011, p. 78). In any case, the presumed group and the underlying commonalities of solidarity deserve critical reflection.

Secondly, solidarity involves some *commitment*, that is a specific relationship between the members of the respective group. Depending on the underlying understanding of solidarity, there are different possibilities. A Christian understanding based on assumptions of a shared anthropological vulnerability of all human beings may suggest selfless merciful care for the weak and wounded. A liberal-egalitarian view focused on ideas of equal individual rights may emphasize reciprocal support among individuals and thus also an aspect of (enlightened) self-interest. A communitarian understanding emphasizing the relevance of the collective may stress the devotion of the individual to the community as a whole. Indeed, the abovementioned WHO statement invokes a universal community of equals but at the same time singles out older people as a special group that we need to „protect, care and support" because they are "among the most vulnerable" (Kluge, 2020). Thus, two communities are imagined at once: the community of all citizens sharing a general anthropological vulnerability and a particularly vulnerable group in demand of 'our' solidarity. This reveals a fundamental ambivalence in the use of the term 'solidarity' which can be 'intransitive', denoting a specific quality of a group and its internal relations, and also 'transitive', directed at another group and thus involving processes of identification and 'othering', that is, distancing from and exclusion of those perceived as different. This ambivalence may also be broached in Ashley E. Taylor's distinction between the "robust solidarity" *within* a group and the "expressional solidarity" *toward* another group (Taylor, 2015).

Thirdly, solidarity includes the idea of carrying *costs*. The mere declaration of solidarity with some group may appear heartwarming and humanitarian but is ultimately vain if not followed by any practical efforts. In this sense, Prainsack and Buyx (2011, p. 46) argue that the solidary motivation always has to be accompanied by corresponding action. Indeed, an extraordinary situation like the current pandemic may require us to take on considerable burdens. In this sense, the WHO states that "[w]e will emerge from this pandemic" but not without "having paid a high price, battered and bruised" (Kluge, 2020). However, due to the limited resources of individuals and societies, the costs that are or should be carried to support others always have to be identified and constantly reviewed with regard to criteria of acceptability, reasonableness and proportionality. It has to be clarified whether the 'investment' of these costs actually yields the desired effects and is in a reasonable balance with other competing goods and moral norms. Thus, in the current situation, the call for a relaxation of solidary measures is frequently justified with reference to inacceptable follow-up costs in the fields of fundamental civic rights or economic welfare. In this sense, the current situation also requires critical reflection of the price, normative weight, and legitimate limits of solidarity.

The three aspects of the underlying group, the commitment, and the practical costs may also help to explain the interrelation between solidarity and the second moral concept often accompanying it in the current discourse: responsibility. In fact, some responsibilities can be seen as a concrete articulation and practical application of solidarity-claims. If solidarity generally means a collective commitment to carry costs to assist others, then this commitment can be spelled out in the form of responsibilities we have towards each other. Such 'solidary responsibilities' may comprise the responsibility to support each other or protect a specific group of people in a time of crisis. Moral philosophically speaking, responsibility is a relational concept that always implies a relation between several different entities (Schicktanz & Schweda, 2012). In our context, especially three such relata appear relevant: the subject and object of responsibility as well as the underlying norms. Someone (the *subject*) is responsible for something or someone (*object*) on the basis of certain standards (*norms*). In this conceptual framework, solidarity represents a prominent example for a norm on which responsibility claims can be based. Viewed from the angle of responsibility, this means that the idea of solidarity can provide a basis for a certain kind of responsibility claims.

At the same time, the relational structure of responsibility makes clear why a critical examination and discussion of solidarity and responsibility claims always requires the precise identification of the different actors involved and a careful analysis of their qualities, capacities, and mutual relationships. Thus, while the solidarity group often remains indeterminate in the public and media discourse, the subject and object of a presumed responsibility necessarily need some specification. In this sense, the 'translation' of solidarity into concrete solidary responsibilities calls for a differentiation of the underlying solidarity group into an identified subject and object of responsibility. If we assume that we have certain solidary responsibilities towards older people in the context of the coronavirus pandemic (or vice versa), we have to ask ourselves: Who exactly are 'the old'? And, maybe even more complicated: Who exactly are 'we'? In this vein, the aforementioned ambivalent example of the WHO statement can be interpreted in terms of a specific kind of solidary responsibility of a larger community towards a particularly vulnerable group of its members.

Of course, the precise specification of subjects and objects of responsibilities can be rather challenging. Thus, it is well known that (old) age is an ambiguous and evasive category that can have different meanings depending on the social and cultural context. However, especially when ascriptions of responsibility can have far reaching and serious consequences, e.g., with regard to basic liberties or healthcare access, we cannot content ourselves with a merely vague and unfounded notion of their subject and object. Indeed, not all entities may actually be suitable subjects of responsibility, at all. Thus, responsibilities presuppose a certain range of knowledge and control on the part of their subjects. In order to assume responsibility for something, we have to be able to influence it to some extent. Given that our knowledge about the coronavirus still involves a high degree of uncertainty, e.g., about factors influencing infectiousness and mortality, we need to be careful not to propagate unfounded and exaggerated expectations or fall back into obscure scapegoating (Schweda & Pfaller, 2020). Eventually, there is also a long debate on whether collectives can be a suitable subject of responsibility, at all. Assuming responsibility seems to presuppose certain features of actual subjectivity on the part of the subject, e.g., intentionality and self-determination. There may indeed be phenomena of collective agency and autonomy but these cannot be assumed for any random segment of the population such as 'the young' or 'the old' since they require a minimal degree of internal organization and decision-making (Schicktanz & Schweda, 2012).

As far as the aspect of the norm is concerned, the meaning, implications and practical range of solidary responsibilities can obviously vary according to the underlying understanding of solidarity. Thus, some commentators may emphasize solidary responsibilities of a community towards its weak, vulnerable and underprivileged members, while others rather stress mutual responsibilities between equal individuals or responsibilities of the individual towards its community. It is an important task of analysis to distinguish and clarify the various understandings of solidarity implicit in such responsibility claims and examine their respective entanglements with different social and political positions, interests, and ideologies. Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that by far not all responsibilities rest on norms of solidarity. In fact, many important responsibilities presuppose much stricter and stronger moral or legal standards such as justice or basic human rights. For example, our responsibility to respect the dignity of others and their right to life or self-determination is not contingent upon our solidarity with them and thus does not depend on some form or feeling of communality. Instead, it is supposed to be unconditional and universal. We may in fact even owe it to our worst enemies. In this sense, solidary responsibilities have a limited range. They may add to a person's already existing moral obligations and provide additional motivation for their fulfilment, but cannot diminish or replace them. Hence it can even be problematic to frame certain responsibilities in terms of solidarity as it might effectively weaken and relativize their actual normative validity and scope. For example, protection of and support for the old is not just a matter of solidarity, but first and foremost a fundamental humanitarian obligation and a general precept of social justice. And while some older people may indeed feel a solidary responsibility vis-a-vis the younger generation not to consume scarce medical resources, this does not diminish their moral right to healthcare. It is therefore fundamentally important to recognize and specify the limits of (intergenerational) solidarity and take into account the whole range of other, often more substantial kinds of responsibilities involved in the coronavirus pandemic.

3. Outlook: Disentangling the moral economy of intergenerational relations

The current discourse on age and intergenerational relations in the face of coronavirus evokes morally charged notions of solidarity and responsibility. Each of these concepts as well as their interrelation involve manifold ambiguous assumptions and normative presuppositions. At least three points require further consideration.

First, the group-relatedness and the question of the respective ‘we’ is a critical point. While solidarity always implies some more or less specified group, the concept of responsibility demands the unambiguous determination of its subject and object. In the current discourse, different ‘we’s’ can be identified as a basis for a solidarity group – ‘the old’, ‘the young’, and society as an (intergenerational) whole. However, closer analysis is needed in order to examine their respective presumed group-status and determine their precise extension and boundaries as well as their suitability as subjects or objects of solidary responsibilities. In doing so, special attention must be paid to problematic processes of (ageist) stereotyping, othering, and discrimination (Ayalon et al., 2020; van Dyk, 2016).

Secondly, the moral paradigms implied in appeals to intergenerational solidarity remain largely unspecified. Some may envision the asymmetrical benevolence of a community turning to its weakest members or – conversely – a particular group making heroic sacrifices for the community as a whole. Others rather invoke the expectation of mutual help and support among equal individuals or groups which allows for a certain degree of enlightened self-interest. Along these lines, there is also the notion of a diachronic reciprocity, a reciprocal exchange over time in which the young are expected to support the old who previously prepared the ground for their existence and welfare. This vision is involved in the idea of different generations connected across time and space and responsible for each other, e.g., the notion of an intergenerational contract underlying many welfare systems. A closer analysis of different models of solidarity and corresponding responsibilities is needed to examine their legitimacy and their entanglement with social and political positions, interests, and ideologies (Roodin, 2011).

Finally, it becomes apparent that ‘solidarity’ and ‘responsibility’ are not always a conceptual match made in heaven. On the one hand, the sweeping use of the concept of solidarity can be a strategical move in order to lend prima facie plausibility to unfounded responsibility claims and thus can lead to an inappropriate ‘responsibilization’ of certain individuals or (age) groups (Schweda & Pfaller, 2020). On the other, by far not all responsibilities actually rest on norms of solidarity. In fact, solidary responsibilities frequently have to be put into perspective vis-a-vis stricter and more substantial moral or legal responsibilities, such as the obligation to respect human dignity, basic civic liberties, or fundamental principles of justice and equality. In this way, the normative limits of solidarity and solidary responsibilities come into view.

All in all, the coronavirus pandemic thus not only confronts us with the serious difficulties involved in the (re-)negotiation of mutual expectations and obligations between the generations in a society facing a considerable threat. It also provides a chance to explore the fundamental “moral economy” of our intergenerational relations, that is, the system of “normative ideas of reciprocity, justice and obligations [that] influence the way [we] understand [our] rights and responsibilities as members of a political community” (Nilsson, 2017, p. 79). To this end, however, we need a more systematic socio-empirical as well as moral philosophical analysis of the meaning and use of the concepts of (intergenerational) solidarity and responsibility in contemporary public and political discourses in the face of coronavirus.

Author statement

All authors contributed equally to the article.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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