

Constructs of childhood, generation and heroism in editorials on young people's climate change activism: their mobilization and effects

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Abstract

We analyze the effects of constructions and mobilizations of childhood, generation, and girl heroism in 30 Canadian editorials written in response to 2019 climate change protests. We discuss how the editorials strategically position - and sometimes dismiss- young activists through discourses of childhood innocence, becoming, and social participation. Second, we focus on how the editorials mobilize generation to emphasize either generational division or cross-generational solidarity. Finally, we problematize the editorials' concentration on individualized girl heroism. We thus contextualize and deconstruct truth statements around age, generation, and heroism, emphasizing instead their effects and the potential for certain narratives to better recognize the diversity and solidarity in climate change activism.

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Introduction

In 2019, climate protests proliferated across a number of countries, led primarily by young people. These rallies sparked significant popular and media-based commentary. This paper focuses on 30 Canadian editorials written in response to this activism as they are a pointed medium of argumentation. As scholars informed by the sociology of childhood and youth, we were interested in how editorials portray this activism, especially in terms of how they mobilize discourses of childhood, generation and individual heroism. After reviewing related literature on

the construction and mobilization of such concepts, locating our work in Foucauldian discourse analysis, and reviewing our data sources, we present three themes. First, we discuss how editorial comments on young people's activism strategically mobilize conceptualizations of childhood innocence, becoming and competent social participation, even when discussing youth. Second, we explore how the editorials mobilize conceptualizations of generation, particularly the contrast between those asserting homogeneous generations and a generational divide and those emphasizing cross-generational solidarity. Finally, we problematize how many of the editorials foreground individualized, white activist girl heroism, while others emphasize a rival discourses of collective activism. Our analysis attends to the rhetorical accomplishments and effects of the various discourses deployed in the editorials and in doing so challenges essentialized, individualized and unidimensional analyses of age, generation and activist heroes. We foreground the transformative potential of attention to young people's capacities and relationalities as part of cross-generational and intersectional cooperation.

Literature Review

Discourses of childhood

Conceptualizations of childhood and youth are shaped by historical, cultural and geo-political context (James and Prout, 1997). We think about these conceptualizations as discourses, with discourse being the culturally shared statements, knowledges, actions, and ways of being that construct or produce certain ways of seeing and thinking about the world, including how we think about ourselves and each other as subjects (Jones, 2018). Dominant discourses are predominant, recognizable, normative, and taken for granted; they also produce exclusions. For example, naturalized, dominant discourses of childhood include a focus on childhood innocence, asexuality and naiveté (Garlen, 2018). While these discourses can foster important protections, they are also deployed in ways that reproduce adult authority, reinforce normative gender relations and exclude poor and racialized children (Garlen, 2018; Dumas and Nelson, 2016). Alternative or subjugated discourses can challenge and disrupt dominant discourses, pointing to how discourses can be contradictory, unequally applied, and strategically deployed, all with effects.

Crawley (2011) illustrates tensions around the discursive construction of childhood in the situated, selective, and contradictory deployments of the idea of childhood in the adjudication of asylum-seeking children in the United Kingdom. She found that the UK asylum system positions children as dependent, passive, carefree, and embedded in education. There is little room in this understanding to see children as politically engaged, agentic, and choice-making, and yet many asylum-seeking children are directly embedded in political contexts and 'engaged in the issues affecting themselves and their communities and deeply interested in affecting change' (Crawley, 2011, p.1175). Ironically, when children seek asylum based on dangers they face due to their political involvements, those involvements are either disbelieved because they are children, or they are denied childhood protections. Juffer (2016) points to similar findings in her work on child migrants from Central America attempting to enter the United States. Based on the presumption of vulnerability and helplessness, when migrant children present as complex political subjects, activists and decision-makers, then they are no longer seen as being children and are often redefined as criminals. She counters that it is better to think of these children

through the lens of precarity, allowing us to see them as courageous and agentic in their navigation of impediments, but also needing help.

In quite a different context, Raby and Raddon (2015) examined online comments about a video of a twelve-year-old Canadian girl advocating for banking reform. Many commentators dismissed her as innocent and therefore naïve, unknowing, and vulnerable to adult exploitation, or saw her as only learning to speak about issues in preparation for the future. Through emphasizing childhood innocence and becoming, commentators largely undermined the girl's arguments. Others framed her as an exceptional child, thus reinforcing more dominant views of child incompetence.

In these examples, discourses of childhood innocence and becoming are used to position children as unknowing, apolitical, and unable to represent themselves, while at the same time excluding the knowing, engaged and political child from the category of childhood and its potential protections. These processes have also been racialized and gendered, for instance with black children more likely positioned and problematized (i.e. criminalized) as adult-like (Dumas and Nelson, 2016), and white girls' political engagements more likely dismissed as harmlessly childlike (Taft, 2020). Over the last three decades, there has been a growing, alternative discourse of childhood, however, supported by child advocates, child activists, and researchers, which positions all children as social participants whose viewpoints should be valued and included in decision-making (e.g. Hart, 1992; Checkoway, 2011). This counter-discourse has fueled arguments for children to be formally involved in various levels of decision-making and has led to recognition that children shape their social worlds, including through activism.

Generations

Sociologist Karl Mannheim (1964) argues that generation encapsulates the experience of being in a particular age group embedded within certain pivotal social events that create a sense of shared identity. He sees dramatic events during youth as particularly pivotal for creating a sense of generation. Many others have drawn on Mannheim's work. For instance, countering an emphasis on life course transitions that they see as deterministic and normalizing, Wyn and Woodman (2006) adopt the idea of generation to examine how age cohorts navigate their lives within specific economic, social and political conditions. They also note the participation of young people themselves in these processes. Eyerman and Turner have drawn on Bourdieu to build on Mannheim's approach to generation, emphasizing that a generation shares a habitus, a collective memory, and access to certain resources and life chances (1998). In another example, Milkman (2017) draws on Mannheim's approach to generation to understand millennial-led social movements in the United States.

While these portrayals of generation are pertinent to this paper, as they resonate with a number of editorial comments, we follow Karen Foster (2013) who notes that while there is importance to recognizing the structure and material consequences of generation, we can also explore how generation is deployed as a discourse with effects. Foster sees generation as a 'tool for understanding, without necessarily imbuing it with transcendent or essential qualities' (p.197); we can understand how the idea of generation is used without seeing generation as fixed or inevitable. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) similarly talk about social generations as 'culturally constructed labels and narratives that are discursively mobilized' (p.167) and embedded in power relations. In this paper, we focus on how generation and associated narratives are mobilized by editorial writers.

Children's political engagement with climate change

The assumption that today's young people are not sufficiently politically engaged (see Molina-Girón, 2017) has been challenged by numerous child and youth scholars who point to diverse ways that young people are nonetheless politically involved, even if their involvements differ from formal political engagements (Checkoway, 2011; O'Toole et al., 2003). Taft and Gordon (2013), for instance, draw on their ethnographic research with youth activists across the Americas between 2002 and 2006, to illustrate their political activism and to argue that most young activists are critical of established attempts to involve young people in politics, through youth councils for instance, where they feel their participation is limited or controlled by adults. Instead, these young people embrace more collectivist, grassroots political action.

Much child participation in climate change activism is similarly non-institutionalized and grassroots. Strazdins and Skeat (2011) note that children are particularly vulnerable to the 'economic, social and cultural impacts of climate change' (p.3), especially in the Global South. While children tend to only be seen as possible victims rather than people with views and capacity to make change, children's recent climate change activism, spurred on by school strikes, has led to greater recognition that children are active in addressing climate change. For example, Holmberg and Alvinus (2020) note that young environmental activist Greta Thunberg's speeches illustrate children's awareness of, and engagement with, climate change concerns. Drawing on a multi-method research project in Norway between 2011 and 2017, O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward (2018) similarly point to the diversity of courageous strategies that young activists use to address climate change, including climate strikes.

The activist girl hero

Finally, some discussions of young people's political engagement focus on the prominence of certain young people, especially girls, who are elevated as individual heroes. For instance, individual girl heroes have been identified as prominent in recent activism around girls' access to education (Malala Yousafzai), the dangers of gun violence (Emma González), climate change (Greta Thunberg), and – though less prominently – water preservation (Autumn Peltier). Thunberg has been a particularly noted leader in climate change activism.

The focus on activist girl heroes often suggests that girls are individualized, neo-liberal subjects successfully taking on the world. While it is exciting to see some girls' activist work being recognized, girls are frequently problematically positioned as post-feminist subjects free from constraints, thus failing to recognize the impossibly high bar that is set by this 'can-do girl' (Harris, 2004) narrative, especially in the context of ongoing structural inequalities girls navigate, including sexism, racism and colonialism. Gender inequality and the spectacle of individual girl heroism is evident in the image of Thunberg that emerged in Alberta, Canada, when a company created disturbing bumper stickers implying her sexual assault. The activist girl hero narrative, while frequently celebratory, makes the individual girl vulnerable to attack. However, Taft (2020) suggests that recent public acknowledgement and appreciation of certain, largely white activist girl heroes, is linked to common assumptions about girlhood that prevent girls from being seen as threatening. As she notes, 'through this figuration, the girl activist can, ironically, be depoliticized and treated as just another inspirational example of an empowered girl' (2020:11).

Meanwhile Black and Indigenous girl activists are less likely to be recognized at all (e.g. see Evelyn, 2020). Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality requires that we attend to intersecting inequalities, particularly how the complex

interplay of gender, race and class discrimination challenges ‘single-axis’ (p.139) attempts to address discrimination. Intersectionality thus requires that we consider not only gender or race in young people’s activism, but the specific experiences of Black and Indigenous girls. Brown (2009), for instance, points to the silencing of Black girls ‘in spite of the can-do rhetoric of girl empowerment’ (p.16), and Black girls’ persistent attempts to speak up and speak back in the face of gendered racism. Clark (2016) extends intersectionality to focus on ‘Red Intersectionality’ to discuss Indigenous girls’ experiences of the violence of gendered colonialism violence. Importantly integral to her approach is attention to Indigenous girls’ activist, resistant response, even in the face of being systematically silenced. Clark’s approach reflects de Finney’s (2014) emphasis on Indigenous girls’ ‘presencing’ in the face of pervading attempts to silence them and position them as dispensable. Presencing includes locating themselves in relation to the land: ‘it involves intensities of place, affect, spirit, healing, embodied contestation, political struggle for sovereignty, and community building’ (p.19). These emphases on intersectionality, resistance and presencing require that we address the frequent failure to recognize Black and Indigenous girls’ activism in our attention to individual, activist girl heroes.

The focus on individual, activist girl heroes also negates the centrality of connection and community that are integral to most activism, including peer-to-peer activist education (Keller, 2020; Bent, 2020; Taft and Gordon, 2011). Activist girls themselves have pointed to the value of collective action (Taft and Gordon, 2011). Bent discusses how activists such as Emma González try to counter the individualized girl power narrative and its associated risks through an emphasis on intersectionality and community (2020). Keller’s discussion of feminism mobilized through *Teen Vogue*, and particularly her use of Ahmed’s conceptualization of ‘feminist snap’ also challenges the framing of girls’ activism as overly individualized and risky, instead highlighting powerful, collective, intersectional feminist activist moments of ‘radical impatience’ (Keller, 2020: 820). We draw on these literatures when attending to the frequent emphasis on Greta Thunberg in the editorials we examined.

Methodology

Recognizing that language is a constitutive and thus integral feature of power relations, we are interested in how certain discourses surrounding age cohorts, generations and activist girl heroes are produced and mobilized in editorial pieces. As Rapley explains, we are interested in how elements of texts are put together to create meaning, to produce subject positions, and to shape how we think (2007). Through Foucauldian discourse analysis we can examine the discourses that are circulating within a set of texts or other materials, locate them historically and within their specific context, examine how they are being deployed, recognize where they may contradict, and reflect on their effects (Cheek, 2008). Part of the challenge and promise of Foucauldian discourse analysis is that there is never one meaning behind a text and the researcher is also, in the process of doing the analysis, producing discourse. Following this point, the kinds of questions that we have asked of the editorial data include: What kinds of discourses are being deployed, especially with regards to key concepts such as childhood, generation and activist, and with what effects? How might these productions contrast with other ways that childhood, generation and activist are also discussed, and how do they take on a particular form in the context of these editorials? Where do they complement each other and where are there tensions or contradictions in how these discourses are produced and deployed?

The current Canadian government and many Canadians are notably sympathetic to environmental issues, although there is division on this issue across this country, especially due to the force of the oil industry. Some of this tension is illustrated in the editorials we discuss, as these editorials come from across the country and from a range of publishers. While Canadian newspaper ownership has been increasingly consolidated under a small number of companies, there is not a single monopoly and, as illustrated in the Appendix, the newspapers included in this study come from a range of sources. We first used the Google “news” feature to locate Canadian editorials on young people’s participation in the global climate strike movement in 2019, with most published in September and October of 2019. We sought articles that offered commentary about young people’s participation in the global climate strikes. We located the editorials in our sample by using the search terms ‘global climate strike movement,’ ‘young people,’ ‘children,’ ‘climate strike,’ ‘climate protests,’ and ‘global day of action.’ We also located articles by looking at similar articles recommended by newspaper websites and by using the above terms in the search engines of specific Canadian mainstream and alternative news source websites (see Appendix). We did not include letters to the editor, editorials from student-run university papers, or photo essays. Our final collection for analysis contained 30 editorials.

Once the articles were collected, both authors open-coded them for patterns without a pre-set collection of codes but with particular attention to how they were presenting and discussing age, generation and heroic activism. We then removed, combined, or re-coded any codes that were only used once or twice, combined codes that were very similar, and focused in on those codes connected to discursive representations of young activists. We then examined how these representations were deployed. We also created a short description for each of the editorials in order to outline their general inclinations and orientations (briefly summarized in Table 1).

Table 1: Editorial tone

Editorials using young people’s climate change activism as a hook, without really focusing on young activists	5
Editorials that were uncritical of the climate change activists	8
Editorials that were generally supportive of the climate change activists	17

Mobilizing discourses of childhood

Depending on the authors’ positions on climate change, the editorials that we analyzed frame the young climate change activists through a number of different lenses, including innocence, becoming, and activist citizenship. These lenses are at times contradictory, and have the effect of dismissing, supporting or dividing young activists.

Innocence

Childhood is commonly equated with innocence, a linkage that first became prominent through Rousseau’s writing in the 18th century (Wyness, 2018), and became associated with middle class families and then cemented into various Canadian laws in the late 19th century (Chunn, 2003). Importantly, this emphasis on innocence has come to ensure children’s protection, but it has also been used to limit their access to information and to undermine their

viewpoints (Wyness, 2018) and their activism (Taft and Gordon, 2011). In the climate change editorials, only a handful suggest that young climate change activists are ignorant, incapable or naïve due to innocence, however, which may in part be because many of the young activists were older children or youth and very knowledgeable about environmental issues. Also, many of the editorial writers are sympathetic to the cause of climate change, supporting their acceptance of the young people's competence (see below).

Four editorials, all associated with the more conservative newspaper publisher PostMedia, forcefully deploy a discourse of childhood innocence, however, and all as part of a critique of climate change activism. Three expressed concern that these adults are hurting children by fostering anxiety and depression about the environment, thus threatening their innocence. In these examples, child innocence needs protecting through limiting children's knowledge about climate change. A *Postmedia* editorial from Sept. 28, 2019 is dedicated to this idea, saying that 'Telling children that the world is soon going to end is stressful to them and can even be harmful.' These editorials also portray child activists as pawns of adults with ideological motivations, and thus unable to think for themselves (see also Raby and Raddon, 2015; Crawley, 2011). Fatah's (2019), for instance, suggests that Thunberg and others are being manipulated by 'the rhetoric of millionaire Marxists.' Concoran (2019), however, contends that *all* environmentalists, including adults, are pawns or 'puppets parroting the latest pronouncements of scientists who have been disseminating false warnings for decades.' On the one hand, this framing disrupts portrayals of children as uniquely naïve, but on the other hand it can reinforce the idea of childhood naiveté by infantilizing adult activists. Concoran calls Thunberg 'Greta' and the activist, adult author Margaret Atwood 'Peggy', for example. Overall, editorials that emphasize children as innocent in terms of being vulnerable, impressionable and naïve use these dominant understandings of childhood to undermine climate change activism.

In contrast, three sympathetic editorials, all linked to mainstream publications, emphasize child activists' lost innocence due not to their activism but to adults' failure to address climate change. Olsen writes: 'It is appalling that children, not adults, are leading the way in putting climate change effects in the public's mind.' She argues that children should not have to deal with the inaction of previous generations. Fisher similarly emphasizes that children are burdened because their future is jeopardized. This is a framing that Thunberg herself uses, e.g. when saying at the UN: 'You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words' (*The Guardian*, 2019). The emphasis on children's lost innocence due to adult inaction suggests that children should not normally have to deal with political issues. This is a powerful tactic, as it uses the ideal of children's lost innocence to highlight the urgency of climate change activism and to shame adults, but it also reproduces the infantilizing and privileged idea that children should not be concerned with politics, a representation of childhood that is challenged by many researchers who point out that children's lives, especially those on the margins, are directly affected by political issues (e.g. see Crawley, 2011).

Becoming

Another common discourse of childhood is that it is a time of becoming, or moving towards an endpoint of adulthood. Those adopting this approach tend to think about what children will become in the future rather than what they are in the present and emphasize preparation for that future as the primary role of childhood (Wyness, 2018; Prout and James, 1997). This emphasis is used in three editorials, all connected to Postmedia, to undermine children's activism. For instance, a Postmedia editorial (Sept. 27, 2019) suggests that children 'should be in school learning about the facts,' rather than being taken to 'ideologically motivated

protests.’ Thomson (2019) similarly argues that teachers should be getting children outside, learning to love nature, ‘before asking them to protect it.’ Battershill (2019) thinks that Thunberg, specifically, is in need of more education about positive aspects of Alberta’s oil industry.

In these examples, the discourse of becoming – specifically becoming educated – positions children as not yet competent to speak out while adults, in contrast, are understood to be legitimate speakers (see also Raby and Raddon, 2015). This tactic undermines the viewpoints of young climate activists, but also those of children in general, reinforcing age-based hierarchy. An emphasis on becoming educated is not always opposed to climate activism, however. The Star Editorial Board (2019) suggests that rallies themselves are valuable sites for learning. In this case, the young person is still in the process of being educated, with participation about becoming something in the future rather than having knowledge and concerns in the present. As well as de-legitimizing young activists, these emphases on becoming educated may also prevent young people from seeing themselves as legitimate activists. We see this in Taft’s study of activist girls (2017) in which a number of participants positioned themselves as in the process of becoming activists rather than being activists, despite their many activist involvements (2017).

The idea of becoming was also invoked in quite a different way in eleven editorials from a range of media outlets: to explain young people’s special interest in environmentalism. As quoted by the Star Editorial Board, Thunberg asks: ‘Why should we be studying for a future that soon may be no more?’ Linked to an emphasis on generational differences (see below), many authors argue that children face a future of devastation. Huebert (2019), for instance, notes that children ‘will have to deal with the consequences of a warming climate and rampant pollution that are devastating the environment in areas around the world.’ This emphasis on future climate devastation legitimizes young people’s investment in climate change activism, framing it as a ‘child-friendly’ cause. These arguments importantly merge children’s activism in the present with concerns about their futures, echoing what many young activists are arguing, and use the future-orientation of children being in the process of becoming to suggest that we should not dismiss children’s viewpoints in the present. However, some of the editorials weighed in on what such activism should look like, legitimizing only certain kinds of actions. For instance, Levy (2019) would prefer for young people to be ‘picking up garbage’ than ‘yelling into the wind’ and missing school (see O’Brien et al., 2018, on how there is more societal tolerance for ‘dutiful dissent’ than ‘disruptive’ or ‘dangerous’ activism). More broadly, the future-oriented framing of certain kinds of climate change activism as legitimate for young people to adopt can in turn problematically suggest that other sites of activism, e.g. that are based on immediate, structural inequalities, are inappropriate for children.

Competent activist citizens in the present

Rather than dismissing the young climate activists, most editorial writers from mainstream media outlets embraced them. One way to do so was to focus on young protestors as thoughtful and informed citizens in the present, reflecting a discourse of young people as social – and political – participants and rivalling emphases on innocence or becoming. Olsen (2019), for instance, talks about how a small group of citizens like these young people can change the world. Huebert (2019) emphasizes the wisdom and innovation of the school climate strikes. Such attention to children’s capacities in the present resonates with child advocacy initiatives that emphasize children’s skills and knowledge (e.g. see Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020), although some have raised concerns about prioritizing competence. First, this emphasis implies that

children are only able to speak out if they are considered competent, suggesting that only older and more articulate children should or could be involved in activism. This position is reflected in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which ties children's right to a say in decision-making to their 'evolving capacities' (UN CRC, 1989). For young people themselves, an emphasis on competence may in turn lead them to feel that an activist identity is out of reach (Taft, 2017). Second, we must ask how competence is being measured (Le Borgne and Tisdall, 2017). Frequently the measures are presumed adult-like traits such as maturity, articulateness, rationality, and working within established institutional systems (Le Borgne and Tisdall, 2017). Ironically, when children exhibit too much of this kind of competence, however, they can be dismissed as precocious (Taft, 2017). Further, a narrow understanding of 'competence' may presume that activism should only look a certain, palatable way, and also raises questions about which children are seen as competent.

Another way that two editorials positioned children as viable activists in the present was to emphasize the labour involved in activism, countering the position that climate striking children just want to miss school. Fisher (2019) notes the immense amount of time and effort that his teenage daughter invested in her activism, and Barron (2019) highlights the 'work and passion' of the young climate activists in his community. This is an exciting recognition of the time and energy that young people invest in their political engagements, although it also implies that work, which is often associated with maturity and responsibility, legitimizes activism. This tactic may again affirm certain kinds of activism and not others. For instance, the work of young people involved in planning and organizing protests indicates the value of that activism, but those young people who are not part of this work, such as those who show up to a rally or post it online, may be problematically dismissed (e.g. as 'slack-tivists') (Cabrera et al., 2017).

Editorials emphasizing child citizenship and competence often contrast it with adult deficits. As Olsen (2019) explains, 'I am saddened by the fact that today's children are burdened by the inaction of today's and yesterday's adults. Huebert (2019) also laments that young people have become 'the conscience of society'. Fisher (2019) contrasts these young activists' actions with those of politicians, corporate leaders and bureaucrats. Such comments bolster children's positions but can also undermine them, specifically when authors contend that adults are behaving like children. Mancini and Roumeliotis (2019) pursues this line of argument in celebrating Thunberg: 'Greta's consistency, her reliance on the science, her rationality, her stunning maturity. I mean she looks like an adult compared to the people who were attacking her, who look like children, basically,' he says. This tactic seems affirming but positions child activists as exceptional children, celebrates them for being adult-like and critiques adults for being child-like, all of which undermine children as a group.

There is value in recognizing young people as competent activists in the present as it takes their contributions seriously and provides possibilities for intergenerational recognition and solidarity in ways that those emphasizing innocence and becoming fail to do. In this section we have also outlined some pitfalls to this approach, however, as it may only value some young people's contributions based on them looking and sounding a specific kind of way – aspects that are linked to age and associated conceptualizations of competence, but also linked to ways that age intersects with class, race and disability in ways that recognized certain activists and not others. The activism of working class, racialized, Indigenous and disabled young people is frequently overlooked in favour of young, white, middle class activists (e.g. Bent, 2020; Evelyn, 2002, and see section on individual heroism below). Ironically, younger and more marginalized

young activists also run the risk of being dismissed when they look too competent or adult-like and are thus seen as either precocious or as pawns of adults.

Mobilizing discourses of generation

Discourses of generation are also frequently mobilized across the editorials, deployed in ways that can either isolate groups of activists or unite them.

Evoking the past: Generational differences

Various Postmedia authors draw on the past to suggest that environmental activism is now too intense and over-the-top. Osorio (2019), for instance, favours past focus on recycling, respecting nature, and avoiding idling cars, rather than saving the planet from total destruction. Fatah (2019) reminds young activists that older generations accomplished great things, like literacy for all and individual liberties, implying that we need to be grateful for past accomplishments rather than blaming older generations for environmental destruction. Both authors represent the past as a golden age that should be appreciated. Past generations are also evoked to talk about sacrifice. Supporting the need for social change in the face of climate disaster, the more progressive *St. Catharines Standard* editorial suggests that past generations made far greater sacrifices than those people are being asked to make now in the name of environmentalism. All of these portrayals emphasize a generational divide and downplay actions of past generations that have contributed to today's climate issues.

In contrast, other writers concerned about climate change suggest that adults, and especially baby boomers, created the environmental destruction that the younger generation must now grapple with. Fisher (2019), for instance, suggests that young people have had to step up because most adults do not fully understand 'that these children have grown up in a world with no future, a world where the future has been cauterized.' Nerenberg (2019) similarly talks about how the youth climate strikers are challenging the illusions and denials of baby boomers, and Huebert (2019) suggests that past generations acted like they were 'the Earth's owners rather than its tenants.'

The discourse of generation is used in certain editorials either to absolve people of past actions or to criticize past generations and champion young climate change activists. In both cases, generation is presented as a homogeneous divide that is highlighted as integral to climate change concerns, pitting older generations against a younger one in a way that fails to recognize or support intergenerational solidarities or the deeply unequal effects of climate change, including disproportionate impacts on Northern Indigenous communities in Canada. Only Hanson (2019) and Olsen (2019) challenge this narrow generational narrative, Hanson with a focus on the centrality of intergenerational learning and cooperation in her discussion of Indigenous environmental activist Autumn Peltier, and Olsen with a counter-focus on intra-generational inequalities, noting that 'not all adults have the luxury of thinking about the future needs of their children and grandchildren. Some are barely getting by from day to day.'

Cross-generational cooperation

In six editorials, generation is deployed as a form of solidarity, however, stressing cross-generational cooperation for our on-going stewardship of the earth. Many of these authors see and encourage intergenerational cooperation. Barron (2019) appreciates seeing younger and older climate strikers coming together to address climate change, and Gerbis (2019) suggests that

young people are looking to adults to support and lead them. Specific forms of intergenerational learning are also discussed, most notably intergenerational teachings and learnings that are central to Indigenous communities (e.g. see Moore, 2017). Hanson (2019) discusses how Peltier learned from ‘her great aunt’s passionate advocacy for the protection of the Great Lakes’. Hanson quotes Peltier who says ‘Our message is stronger when it’s more than one person.’ In stark contrast, Corocoran [2019] makes fun of intergenerational cooperation, talking about how activists like ‘Greta’ and ‘Peggy’ share the same alarmism. Some editorialists also talk about their own past involvement in environmentalism and their desire to share their knowledge. For instance, Olsen says “welcome aboard” to everyone who is a recent self-proclaimed environmentalist,’ reminding readers that environmental activism is not new and recognizing generational continuity.

It is noteworthy that editorial emphases on solidarity across ages and generations is always linked to valuing climate activism. This deployment of generational solidarity disrupts the individual hero narrative we discuss below and recognizes interdependence across generational difference, providing a powerful grounding for encouraging climate activism and building sustainability. As Nairn (2019) finds, such collective approaches to addressing climate change foster hope and help activists deal with despair and consequent burnout. An intergenerational approach also recognizes the role and relevance of children, valuing their contributions to this movement. Intergenerational activism is not always easy to accomplish, however, as a number of authors on young people’s participation and activism have pointed out. While children want the support and guidance of adults (Wyness, 2012; Taft 2019), they also frequently find that their viewpoints are not sufficiently taken into consideration (e.g. see Taft, 2019; Edell, Brown and Montano, 2016). This may be especially likely if certain kinds of adult-like competency are considered a prerequisite for adults to see young people’s activism as legitimate, pointing to the importance of valuing the diverse ways that children contribute.

The individual girl hero

The final significant trend across most of the climate change editorials is a focus on Greta Thunberg, specifically, as an individualized hero, celebrity, and/or problem. Five articles seem to mention Thunberg only as a ‘catch,’ to draw readers and associated revenue at a time when she was prominent in the news, and then they focus in on issues tangentially related to young people’s climate change activism. This tactic can be dismissed as a media ploy, but it does still participate in reproducing the idea of an exceptional hero. Many editorials concentrate on Thunberg as an individual, even isolated, leader or inspiration without discussion of other climate change activists or climate change activism as a collective endeavour. While a number of articles include a photo of a group of young activists participating in climate strike, and a few touch on more local activists, they frequently only talk about Thunberg. Pointedly, only Hanson (2019) mentions Autumn Peltier, highlighting how she is a member of the Wikwemikong First Nation in northeastern Ontario, and an outspoken, accomplished activist around environmental and equity issues connected to water in Canada and the number of boil water advisories in Indigenous communities. Hanson writes: ‘While Thunberg is understandably a hero to many Canadians, we actually have our very own young climate hero here in Canada.’ Hanson goes into significant detail about Peltier, including her role in speaking to the United Nations in 2018. The absence of references to Peltier in Canadian editorials, along with other young BIPOC activists, crucially points to the persistent erasure of non-white climate change activists in the media (Evelyn, 2020). We saw this particularly intensely when Ugandan environmental activist

Vanessa Nakate was cropped out of an Associate Press image of prominent young activists, leaving four white activists in the image (Evelyn, 2020).

It may nonetheless be exciting to see recognition of young women like Thunberg in prominent positions of activist leadership. Yet we must be cautious about such focus on individual girl heroes (Bent, 2020). Some of the challenges of this framing are evident if we look at the editorial representations of Thunberg. First, as Taft (2020) discusses, the girl hero is frequently positioned as a symbol of hope, or someone who will save us, but she is at the same time understood through the figure of harmless girlhood. The Star Editorial, for instance, says Thunberg, ‘a petite schoolgirl with long pigtails skipped classes [and] sat outside the Swedish parliament with a hand-painted sign that read “school strike for climate.”’ However, Thunberg has generally made it difficult for the media to dismiss her as a harmless schoolgirl, because she is blunt and angry. It might be more fruitful to see Thunberg as presenting a “snappy girlhood” that riles, unsettles, and stirs public sentiment’ (Keller, 2020).

We see Thunberg more directly undermined through a second tactic: personal critique. Some of the attacks on Thunberg, emphasizing her youth, her girlhood, her depression and even her autism (e.g. see North, 2019) have been harsh, as have sexist portrayals. As Bent argues (2020), writing about Emma González, there is a vulnerability to being raised high as an individual hero who, in turn, is then taken down. This vulnerability then undermines a social movement more broadly, as it is a warning to other potential activists. A focus only on individual girl heroes dovetails into the exceptionalism narrative which suggests that most young people are disinterested in politics. As Taft explains, ‘When individual girl activists are presented as lone heroes or exceptional figures, activism is made to seem like something distant and unusual, rather than something that thousands of girls around the world are practicing and have been practicing for decades’ (2020:12). A focus on an isolated, neoliberal individual hero free from structural constraints – whatever their gender – can in turn undermine a movement if that movement is then seen as embodied only by one person.

Young people’s environmental activism is also more broadly undermined in a third way, which is by focusing in on a single girl who also occupies a position of privilege due to her whiteness and location as middle class, and therefore neglecting the many diverse and frequently marginalized girls across the world who have also been involved in addressing climate change. In this way, the activism of BIPOC girls is again disregarded (Clark, 2016; de Finney, 2014; Brown, 2009). As some young climate activists have stressed, they are a part of a broad movement of diverse, long-term, interconnected and cross-generational people and supports that recognizes the relevance of historical and ongoing injustices and their links to environmental destruction (e.g. Bowman, 2020; Hirsh, 2020; Almahdi, 2019; see also Bent’s discussion of Emma Gonzalez, 2020). Young climate activists have also emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing inequalities in more mainstream climate change activism. As the Sierra Student Coalition states: “Over the last several years, the Sierra Student Coalition has made an intentional and important shift to supporting and being led by BIPOC, poor and working class people and young people of other communities and identities most impacted by climate change and interacting systems of oppression” (Sierra Club, 2021).

An emphasis on how activist girls are organizing with other diverse young (and older) people challenges the precarious individualizing and paradoxically de-politicizing narrative of activist heroes and the framing of young activists as exceptions to normative childhood. A few of the editorials recognize this, and one in particular stands out. Kirman’s (2019) editorial from the leftist media news site Rabble.ca describes a large climate strike in Edmonton. She uniquely

explains how Indigenous leaders and people of colour led the march, and how the organizers ensured that the march moved slowly to accommodate participants with disabilities. Kirman explains how ‘The activists [...] are building strong coalitions and they will make a change.’

Conclusion

We have discussed the portrayal of young climate change activists in 30 climate change editorials that were published in Canada in 2019. While most of these editorials are notably supportive of climate change activism, they almost all strategically engage with dominant discourses of childhood, generation and individual heroism to construct certain understanding of young people’s climate change activism. Many of these constructions have the effect of directly or indirectly dismissing young activists, individualizing their activism, disregarding the relevance of intersecting inequalities and particularly the activism of BIPOC girls, failing to recognize the unequal effects of climate change (particularly in relation to Indigenous communities), and downplaying intergenerational solidarity through an emphasis on both the child-adult binary and on homogenized generational conflict.

We have focused in on how certain discourses of childhood are deployed, such as innocence, becoming, and young people as social participants. Following authors like Crawley (2011), Juffer (2016) and Raby and Raddon (2015) we have found that dominant understandings of childhood are deployed in order to undermine children’s views when an adult author disagrees with what young people are advocating, or to embrace them, although in the latter case emphases on an individual activist’s exceptionalism can undermine children more broadly. We have also looked at how the concept of generation is frequently and powerfully used to dismiss and to bolster the cause of climate change activism. A number of editorials emphasize a generational divide, failing to recognize intra-generational diversity and inequality, and failing to recognize inter-generational solidarity around climate change activism. Other commentators push back against this latter tendency, however, emphasizing how much climate activism involves generations working together, and that this is valuable work of solidarity. Finally, we have illustrated how the overwhelming focus on the individual girl hero importantly acknowledges girls’ roles in climate change activism but puts girls into a precarious position, elevates certain more privileged girls over more marginalized and especially racialized others, and again undermines the significant collective and intersectional focus of climate change activism.

Together, these representations suggest ongoing adult-child hierarchies, some collective ambivalence about young people’s activism, a failure to recognize privilege and disadvantage in the effects of climate change and the representation of activists, and significant tension between a focus on the individual girl hero and recognition of activism as collective. We have also noted ways in which young climate activists themselves are pushing back against such representations. How can we think about young climate activists in different ways, outside of dominant discourses of childhood, a divisive focus on generation, and individual, privileged girl heroes? We were struck by the number of editorials that take climate change activists seriously, and we feel that some of the editorials point to ways that this can be done: by recognizing the investments of young activists in the present and honouring their strategies even if those strategies do not reflect adult competencies; by recognizing and encouraging cross-generational cooperation rather than division; and by recognizing intersectionality and collectivism in ways that do not solely focus on one prominent girl hero.

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Appendix: Editorials included in the study, by publisher

Black Press Group (covering 170 publications across western Canada and the United States).

Barron, R. (2019, Oct. 20). Climate-change deniers need to take a closer look. *Cowichan Valley Citizen*.

Interior News. (2019, Oct. 2). EDITORIAL: We wish we could offer climate strikers more. *Interior News*, Black Press.

Sculland, K. (2019, Sept. 21). Editorial: Climate compliance. *The Golden Star*, Black Press Group.

Summerland Review. (2019, Oct. 2). EDITORIAL: Climate is a global concern. *Summerland Review*. Black Press Group.

CBC (national, public broadcaster)

CBC Calgary. (2019, Sept. 27). Climate strikers naive but have right to protest, say energy sector leaders. *CBC*.

Huebert, S. (2019, Jan. 27). The wisdom of youth: On climate change, adults should listen to young voices. *CBC*.

Mancini, M. & Roumeliotis, I. (2019, Sept. 30). How Greta Thunberg's autism helps give her a singular focus. *CBC*.

PostMedia Group (national, conservative)

Battershill, C. (2019, Oct. 16). Opinion: Thunberg's visit to Alberta should be very educational — for her. *National Post*.

Corcoran, T. (2019, Oct. 18). Politicians want to be friends with climate warriors like Greta. It won't work. *National Post*.

Fatah, T. (2019, Sept. 25). Carry on Greta, but beware the millionaire Marxists. *Toronto Sun*.

Furey, A. (2019, Sept. 26). Parents need to keep a close eye on what the climate strike tells their kids. *Toronto Sun*.

Levy, S. (2019, Sept. 26). Toronto students allowed to skip school to protest 'climate crisis'. *Toronto Sun*.

Postmedia News. (2019, Sept. 26). Editorial: How young people can save the planet. *Toronto Sun*.

Postmedia News. (2019, Sept. 28). Editorial: Climate conversation lacks needed nuance. *Toronto Sun*.

Thomson, G. (2019, Sept 27). What comes after the climate strike? Education. *Edmonton Journal*.

Rabble.ca, (national, online, not-for-profit, progressive media outlet)

Hendrickson, O. (2019, Oct.1). Older Canadians protest against themselves by joining youth climate strikes. *Rabble.ca*

Kirman, P. E. (2019, Oct. 20). Indigenous voices raised at Edmonton climate strike. *Rabble.ca*

Nerenberg, K. (2019, Sept. 27). Message of the youth climate strike threatens comfortable illusions of baby boomers. *Rabble.ca*

Saltwire Network Publications (covering 27 publications in Atlantic Canada).

Fisher, S. (2019, May 24). Climate strikers aren't slackers; they're working their tails off. *The Chronicle Herald*.

Olsen, V. (2019, Oct. 19). Let's hope the environment finally sticks as an issue. *The Chronicle Herald*.

Torstar (covering 70 publications in central Canada, liberal)

St. Catharines Standard. (2019, Oct. 1). Editorial: Leaders must heed calls for climate action. *St.Catharines Standard*.

Star Editorial Board. (2019, Sept. 26). Educators are right to support students striking for climate justice. *Toronto Star*.

Star Editorial Board. (2019, March 14). Listen to the kids on climate change. *Toronto Star*, Torstar.

Steward, G. (2019, Sept. 24). Students rightly focus on climate crisis rather than Trudeau photos. *St. Catharines Standard*, Torstar.

Teitel, E. (2019, Sept. 25). Greta Thunberg didn't create climate anxiety. But she did add drama to a fight that needed it. *Toronto Star*. Torstar.

Watt, I. (2019, Sept. 29). How much do we care about climate? *Toronto Star*.

Other

Domise, A. (2019, Oct. 1). Our children do deserve better. *Macleans* (national magazine).

Hanson, H. (2019, Sept. 26). This Indigenous Activist Is Canada's Own Greta Thunberg. *Narcity*, Narcity Media – online and aimed at millennials (North America Canada, liberal)

Gerbis, M. (2019, Sept. 23). Op-ed: Ottawa kids are part of a climate revolution. Let's join them before it's too late. *Ottawa Business Journal*. Great River Media (central Canada).

Suzuki, D. (2019, Sept. 17). David Suzuki: Let's all support the global climate strikes! *The Georgia Straight*. (Media Central Corporation (national, alternative,