

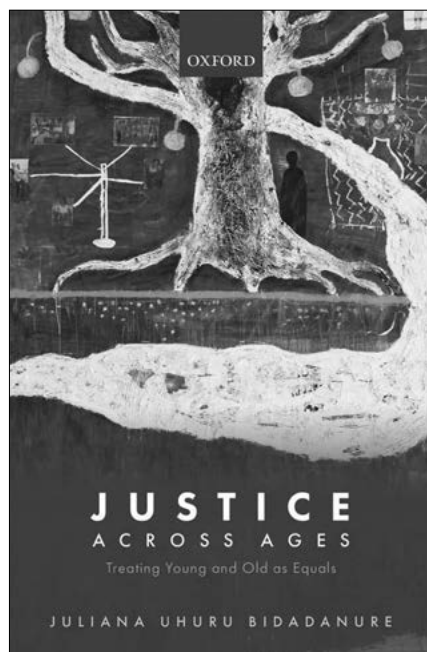
Juliana Bidadanure: Justice Across Ages: Treating Young and Old as Equals

Reviewed by Grace Clover

Intuitively, we are much less concerned by unequal treatment of age groups than we are by gendered or racial discrimination. Whereas we would be rightly alarmed by people of a certain race receiving unequal job opportunities, we seem less bothered by, for example, the increased vulnerability of young people to precarious or poorly paid work. We all age, and thus we assume that differential treatment of age groups is unproblematic, as it may well be “compatible with equal treatment across our whole lives” (7). Does this suggest that age, as a category, is different from race and gender? And if so, how can we develop a theory of justice which considers age? These are the questions that Juliana Bidadanure – a French political and moral philosopher at New York University – poses in her monograph *Justice Across Ages: Treating Young and Old as Equals* (2021).

This monograph represents the culmination of 10 years of Bidadanure’s research on intergenerational justice, relational egalitarianism, and youth policy. She proposes the thesis that “young and old [...] should be treated as equals, but not necessarily always equally, and often not the same” (7), offering a framework for assessing fair and prudent distribution of resources between coexisting generations and for distinguishing between acceptable (or even advisable) and objectionable differential treatments of age groups.

In chapter 1, Bidadanure explains the distinction between ‘age groups’ and ‘birth cohorts’. For Bidadanure, an age group is a group of people at a specific stage of their lives (e.g. adolescents, middle age), whereas birth cohorts are groups of people born at the same specific point in time (e.g. the so-called baby boomers or millennials). Most of us will live long enough to pass through multiple age groups, but our birth cohort remains the same throughout our lives. For example, a person born in 2012 is still a child today, will be an adolescent in a few years, and a young adult a few years after that. Thus, according to Bidadanure’s definition, this person moves through different ‘age groups’ as they grow older. Throughout their entire life, however, this child born remains a member of a ‘birth cohort’ born in 2012, and also a part of the colloquially named ‘Gen Z’ born between 1997 and 2012. That means that whereas birth cohorts are context specific, and depend on the time of one’s birth, age groups exist outside of historical context. In terms of policy, when we talk about younger people experiencing more negative consequences of climate change over their whole lives compared to older people, or people who lived in the past, this is an issue of inequality between cohorts. On the other hand, the exclusion of young people under a certain



age from voting – which has existed for thousands of years – is an issue between different age-groups. Similarly, when we talk about not wanting to over-burden active workers when financing the pension system, this is an question of age-groups. Bidadanure argues that most research into intergenerational justice deals with what we owe future generations (an issue of birth-cohort equality, that is, between all currently living people and people yet to be born), whereas the relationships between coexisting age groups are relatively neglected. This monograph represents her attempt to fill this academic gap.

Having justified her primary focus on age-group equality, Bidadanure considers the question whether equality is a “diachronic value” or a “synchronic value” (8). For Bidadanure, if equality is ‘diachronic’ it is assessed across a whole life (the ‘complete life view’). This kind of equality can

be both interpersonal and intrapersonal. On the other hand, for Bidadanure, ‘synchronic’ equality is assessed by making interpersonal comparisons at any given time (e.g. between a person who is 20 in 2024 and a different person who is 50 in 2024). She argues that we think diachronically instinctively, as we often accept inequalities between young and old when young people can reasonably expect to reach the same position over the course of their whole life. For example, we might prioritise a 20-year-old over an 80-year-old for a transplant, as we assume that the quality and length of the 80-year-old’s *complete life* impacts their entitlement in the present. Synchronic inequalities are not inherently problematic for Bidadanure, but she suggests that there is reason to believe that they can be problematic if they meet certain criteria (more on this in chapters 2 and 3).

In chapter 2, Bidadanure builds upon Norman Daniels’ 1988 work *Am I my parent’s keeper?* and his proposed ‘prudential lifespan account’ (PLA). This is understood as an ideal intrapersonal distribution of resources across one’s life which neither young nor old could object to as unfair. However, Bidadanure argues that we shouldn’t just be concerned with equality over one’s complete lifespan, but also with making a life as good as possible from an impartial perspective. She thus supplements Daniels’ PLA, arguing that inequalities between young and old must meet two further criteria to be unproblematic. First, she proposes her principle of ‘lifespan sufficiency’. According to this principle, institutions must maintain individuals above two thresholds: an absolute minimum standard, which ensures that people can live free from deprivation, and an age-relative threshold defined as a “normal opportunity range”. This is understood as a “reasonable

array of plans for a given age group in a given society at a given time” (83). This principle justifies differential treatment in response to unequal needs (e.g. greater healthcare spending on the elderly). The second principle, called ‘lifespan efficiency’, suggests that “institutions should allocate resources earlier rather than later [...] when doing so would increase diachronic returns significantly” (64). Together, these principles form Bidadanure’s own principle called ‘lifespan prudence’.

As Bidadanure argues, lifespan prudence works within the grain of intersectional thought and fosters socio-economic as well as intergenerational justice. This is a key strength of Bidadanure’s theory. Whereas Daniels isolates age-group issues, assuming that all other forms of justice are in place, Bidadanure’s lifespan efficiency deals explicitly with the diachronic clustering of disadvantage over time, known as ‘corrosive disadvantage’ (82). We observe such corrosive disadvantage in the fact that young people without wealthy families are less likely to be able to take unpaid work experience and are thus more likely to suffer the long-term scarring impacts of youth unemployment. As studies show, those who are unemployed at a young age suffer a wage penalty of up to 13-21% in their forties (144). Thus, the recommendation of the lifetime efficiency principle to invest in youth employment opportunities can also be used to mitigate the entrenchment of socio-economic divides. The lifetime sufficiency principle would also help disadvantaged groups by creating a minimum sufficiency threshold, dramatically altering, for example, the experience of disability in old age.

Moving away from the ‘complete life view’ discussed in chapters 1 and 2, in chapter 3 Bidadanure argues that there is a category of temporary *synchronic* inequality that we should be concerned about, which cannot be explained in distributive diachronic terms. She argues that we should be suspicious of synchronic inequalities created by inegalitarian interpersonal relationships such as “domination, marginalization, stigmatization, demonization, and infantilization” (85), even if these are compatible with complete life and birth cohort equality. In doing so, Bidadanure introduces a relational egalitarian supplement to her distributive egalitarian theory – her principle of ‘synchronic relational equality’ (85). Influenced by Elizabeth Anderson, Bidadanure argues that purely distributive theories of egalitarianism such as McKerlie’s ‘simultaneous segments egalitarianism’ fail to account for the structures, attitudes, and relationships which create oppression (96). She argues that such relations hinder the ability of different age groups to relate to each other as moral equals. Accordingly, we should be suspicious of the infantilisation of the elderly and young adults, the political marginalisation of youth, and the physical segregation of the elderly.

In chapter 4, Bidadanure summarises the principles of ‘approximate birth cohort equality’, ‘lifetime sufficiency’, ‘lifetime efficiency’, and ‘synchronic relational equality’ once more and addresses potential conflicts between them. While some of these principles are very unlikely to conflict, she concedes that the principle of lifetime sufficiency could conflict with birth cohort efficiency in times of demographic change. In this case, Bidadanure argues that age-group justice might come at the cost of cohort equality, meaning that younger generations are disproportionately burdened as they attempt to finance older cohorts with higher birth-rates. Unlike NGOs such as the FRFG which are concerned about such a prospect, Bidadanure argues that such a notion might not necessarily be problematic. If we are pluralist in the currency of egalitarianism we use, she argues, we

might find that younger cohorts will live longer and healthier lives than past cohorts, which would compensate them for their relative financial burden. In short, an increased financial burden might not result in decreased welfare or range of opportunities. In *Part 2* Bidadanure applies her theory to a few key policy areas. In chapter 5, she deals more concretely with the issue of youth vulnerability in the labour market. She considers policy examples, such as the 2013 the EU Youth Employment Initiative and the French ‘contrats de generations’ (generational contracts) introduced in the same year. Returning to her lifespan prudence principles she argues that it is acceptable, or even advisable, to prioritise investment in youth employment as this helps avoid corrosive disadvantage and allows young people to realise normal aspirations. She rejects, however, the idea of a duty on the part of the older people to retire to ‘free up space’ in the labour market, arguing that such policies are generally based upon ageist stereotypes which don’t stand up to synchronic relational equality. She also argues that there is very little evidence that such policies create new job opportunities. Finally, she argues that young people are particularly poorly treated by welfare contractualist systems. In France, for example, under-25s have many more requirements to qualify for the ‘revenu minimum’ (minimum income benefits) because it is assumed that they will receive help from their parents. Many feel that the young should be capable of and willing to work any job, and thus we normalise young people being in precarious financial positions.

Continuing the theme of welfare politics, in chapter 6 Bidadanure compares proposals for universal basic income (UBI) with the notion of basic capital (BC). UBI is a “policy proposal consisting of a regular cash payment given to all members of a community without means-test and with no strings attached” (183). Alternatively, BC involves a large cash instalment at the beginning of one’s adult life. Based on lifespan sufficiency and synchronic relational equality, Bidadanure concludes that the UBI is more prudent and more just than BC, as it would raise individuals above an absolute sufficiency threshold and remove the stigma associated with benefits. The UBI would also allow individuals to find meaningful employment and avoid dominating relationships (194). Ultimately, Bidadanure proposes introducing the UBI throughout adulthood, with an attached ‘baby-bond’ throughout childhood, allowing 18-year-olds to plan for the long-term.

Finally, in chapter 7 Bidadanure considers the problems with the *de facto* (and in the case of the USA, *de jure*) exclusion of young adults from becoming politicians. She also notes the relative disenfranchisement of young people. For example, in the 2018 US midterms under Trump only 35% of 18–29-year-olds registered to vote compared to 65% of those over 65. Bidadanure sees these two issues as problems for democratic legitimacy, creating an “intergenerational democratic deficit” and promoting short-term decision making (210). To remedy this, she proposes lowering the voting age to 16, showing young people that they are valued citizens and moral equals. She also suggests that youth quotas in parliaments should be seriously considered, as have already been successfully trialled in Uganda, Kenya, and Morocco. There are both instrumental and symbolic reasons for this. On the one hand, having more young people in parliament would counter patriarchal assumptions about young people being lazy or apathetic citizens. On the other hand, Bidadanure argues that quotas would increase experiential diversity within parliament, inspire better youth-turn out, and likely lead to a better representation of youth interests and intergenerationally just policies.

All in all, Bidadanure offers an extremely considered, balanced, and persuasive account for justice across ages in this work. She introduces all her principles with clear thought experiments and real-life policy examples. She also takes great care to engage systematically with possible objections to her account, acknowledging the potential limitations of her own theories, whilst still convincingly arguing for their credibility.

One wonders how her policies could be implemented, however. She does argue that increasing the representation of young people in parliaments would also increase the likelihood of intergenerationally just policies, as it is young people who will be affected by presentist policies in the future. However, without legally implemented checks on policy, such as the 2015 Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act, a framework such as Bidadanure's might struggle to have wider influence.

The more fundamental objections to Bidadanure's account relate to her treatment of future generations, or what she calls 'approximate birth cohort equality'. Throughout the monograph Bidadanure does argue for the importance of equality between birth cohorts, and systematically demonstrates the ways that her principles would work within this framework. She is also right to suggest that much moral philosophy dealing with intergenerational issues focuses on future people, whereas age-group justice between coexisting groups is relatively neglected. However, I would challenge the underlying implication that birth cohort injustice is widely accepted as a problem. While a YouGov survey this year found that 84% of Britons believe that young people today will find it harder than their parents to buy a home, comments such as those of NatWest chairman Sir Howard Davies' that it shouldn't be "that difficult" to get on the property ladder still gain huge media traction.¹ A narrative which accuses younger birth cohorts of lacking resilience and frivolous spending is remarkably pernicious, despite empirical evidence that housing, for example, is much more expensive today than it was 20 years ago.² Evidence also suggests that 123 of the 535 elected officials in the 118th US congress deny the existence of human-caused climate change, which must be seen as a denial of the rights of future birth cohorts.³ I'm sure that Bidadanure is very aware of this. But she overestimates a larger political community in assuming that birth cohort equality is a widely accepted priority. Moreover, I would challenge Bidadanure's argument that increased financial burdens on young people in the context of social security systems and ageing societies would not necessarily damage their well-being or opportunities. Her flexible use of egalitarian currencies is helpful in other ways, but this argument seems implausible, and conflicts with many of her other pro-early investment conclusions.

The work also seems to be lacking a developed understanding of birth cohorts taken as all people alive today, compared to all people who will be alive in the future. Such a notion is helpful when assessing our responsibilities to dealing with climate justice, for example.

That being said, Bidadanure offers an invaluable contribution to intergenerational research in offering a framework for dealing with age-group injustices. Birth cohorts are, as Bidadanure declares, not the main focus of the work. This monograph lives up to its goal to broaden the reader's understanding of social justice and to work within the grain of intersectional thought by including age and time as a category. Bidadanure's research is all the more impressive for drawing attention to many injustices that we often accept unquestioningly, such as the disproportionate

vulnerability of young people to precarious or demeaning work, or the assumption that youth is a proxy for inexperience and (political) immaturity. While many people remain attached to hierarchical thinking and a narrative of lifelong upward progression, Bidadanure offers very strong reasons for us to rethink many assumptions about society and to assert justice across ages. I would wholeheartedly recommend this work for all those interested in moral philosophy, social justice, and intergenerational issues.

Endnotes

- 1 Smith, Mathew (2024): Compared to 2012, few think things have gotten any easier for the next generation. <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/48411-compared-to-2012-few-think-things-have-gotten-any-easier-for-the-next-generation>. Viewed 14 August 2024.
- 2 See Intergenerational Foundation (2024): Locked out: Intergenerational unfairness in the housing market. <https://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/locked-out-intergenerational-unfairness-in-the-housing-market/>. Viewed 14 August 2024.
- 3 So, Kat (2024): Climate Deniers of the 118th Congress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/climate-deniers-of-the-118th-congress/>. Viewed 14 August 2024.

Bidadanure, Juliana (2021): Justice Across Ages: Treating Young and Old as Equals. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 252 Pages. ISBN: 9780198792185 (Print). Price: £87 hardback.