

Understanding the Baby Boom Generation: Comparative Perspectives

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The concept of the “baby boom” generation has emerged as a significant theme within social gerontology, notably so in the USA but increasingly in a European context. This collection of papers is designed to shed some preliminary light on the idea of the “baby boom” drawing on research undertaken in Finland, France and the United Kingdom. The notion of a “baby boom” is itself open to various interpretations. From a demographic perspective, attention is focused upon the rise in the birth rate across a range of industrialised countries immediately following the end of the Second World War. The trend here was, in reality, highly variable: some countries (e.g. Finland) had a relatively compressed surge in birth rates following demobilization, this coming to an end at the beginning of the 1950s. Others (e.g. Australia and the USA) experienced a longer period of increasing birth rates – typically from the mid-1940s through to the mid-1960s (McKay 1997; Whitbourne and Willis 2006). The UK had a distinctive pattern of two separate peaks in the birth rate – in 1947 and 1964. In comparison, Germany experienced no real baby boom and only a moderate increase in the birth rate in the early 1960s.

From a sociological perspective, boomers have been viewed as having distinctive experiences that set them apart from previous generations. Edmunds and Turner (2002), for example, suggest that in the UK the boomers were a “strategic generation in aesthetic, cultural and sexual terms”. They go on to argue that: “The post-war baby-boomers

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were the first generation to live through a time when a mass consumer revolution transformed popular taste and lifestyles" (2002). More negatively, boomers have also been targeted as bringing instability to pension arrangements and social security. This became a familiar theme in the USA in the late-1980s, where boomers were charged with creating inequalities between generations and saddling their own children with large debts (Longman 1987; Peterson and Howe 1988). It was subsequently to re-surface a decade later with concerns voiced about the economic and social costs arising from a large generation entering retirement (Koltikoff and Burns 2004; Islam 2007).

All the authors in this collection would, however, caution against sweeping judgements about the boomer generation. Certainly, the extent to which boomers are a meaningful social category - and themselves identify with the term - will vary greatly from country to country. In the UK, the evidence from the paper from Biggs et al. suggests rather limited identification. In comparison, the case of Finland indicates boomers having a stronger collective identity, reflecting a mix of demographic, social and cultural influences. Moreover, the boomer generation is likely to carry forward cumulative processes of advantage and disadvantage, with distinctive class, ethnic and gender divisions being maintained. On the other hand, a key issue developed in all four papers concerns the extent to which particular characteristics may be attached to the boomer generation, with those structured around consumption and lifestyle attributes reflecting a key distinction from preceding generations.

The following four papers are designed to illustrate different aspects of the study of the boomer generation, drawing out theoretical perspectives and empirical data drawn from three European countries.

The first paper, from Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, *The third age and the baby boomers: two approaches to the social structuring of later life*, sets out a helpful theoretical framework within which the boomer generation can be located. The authors draw out a distinction between a cohort perspective on the boomers and a generational approach focusing upon the third age. The authors make the point that in terms of identity and self-image, the driving force for boomers is less about demographics, more about the role of consumption and the market-place. Moreover, they trace a connection between the individualised lifestyles of the 60s generation, and

the creation of a “third age” which decouples the traditional link between work and leisure. At the same time, traditional approaches to ageing are also being rejected by boomers, reflected in the emergence of new forms of marketing targeted at the reconstruction of middle age.

The second paper, by Simon Biggs, Rebecca Leach, Chris Phillipson and Anne-Marie Money, *The mature imagination and consumption strategies*, examines approaches to the maintenance of identity among the boomer generation. Essentially, the paper is concerned with the attitudes of boomers towards growing old, the strategies adopted in response to ageing, and potential links with generational and consumption issues. The paper is based upon interviews with 150 respondents in the 1945 to 1954 birth cohort, these carried out in a socially-mixed suburb of South Manchester in England. The authors note, in contrast to the Finnish research, relatively limited identification with the boomer label, but with stronger associations with the idea of a “60s generation”. There is though some evidence (as in Finland) of boomers representing a “bridging generation”, having consumer habits closer to succeeding generations but with approaches to some aspects of expenditure (notably in relation to personal credit) which link back to older generations. The authors indicate the importance of consumption for boomers, especially in areas such as clothing and bodily maintenance. Equally, there is a desire for new forms of ageing, and a rejection of traditional labels associated with “old age”.

The third paper, from Catherine Bonvalet and Jim Ogg, *Ageing in inner cities – the residential dilemmas of the baby boomer generation*, explores the interaction of boomers within the urban environments of Paris and London. The theoretical framework here concerns the importance of “gentrification” i.e. the transformation of city neighbourhoods through the immigration of (relatively) wealthy socio-economic groups. This process has been led in particular by the boomer generation, who has been in the forefront of the creation of lifestyles associated with urban localities. The paper examines the residential choices open to boomers as they move into a stage of the life course where children are leaving home and where retirement draws nearer. The authors examine this issue in the context of interviews carried out with 60 Londoners and Parisians born between 1945 and 1954. The significant research question is whether the reasons

that brought individuals to the city – jobs, resources, housing – remain relevant (and attractive) still in later life. The answers suggest that although for many people in midlife city life retains its allure, others are adversely affected by the rapid changes affecting global cities such as London and Paris. Given the likelihood that most boomers will remain in urban settings (even if a minority have second homes elsewhere), further research on the impact of city living on later life seems important to pursue.

The fourth paper, from Antti Karisto, *Finnish baby boomers and the emergence of the third age*, draws directly upon the perspective developed by Gilleard and Higgs but sets this within a context where there is a more developed boomer identity. The paper spells out a number of characteristics associated with Finnish boomers, these producing a sense of a generation distinctive in comparison with the one preceding and that following. The author grounds this development within the socio-economic context of Finland in the 1950s and 1960s, with the transfer from a rural to an industrial economy and associated opportunities for rapid upward social mobility. This movement of a relatively large social group into a new economic sector was combined with the social characteristic of those reaching maturity in the 60s – notably distinctive forms of self-expression and political radicalism. Following Gilleard and Higgs, the paper also makes the link between boomers and the emergence of new styles of consumption, especially in the period following the ending of full-time employment. However, the paper also develops the argument that it is more accurate to view boomers as a “crossroads generation”, with attributes drawn from the preceding generation as well as having novel attitudes and perspectives of its own.

In conclusion, these papers present a number of theoretical and empirical perspectives on the idea of the boomer generation. Despite the undoubted need for caution in extrapolations to the future, important sociological and policy issues about boomers do need to be tackled. Generalisations about this group are actually quite difficult given the differences across countries; and demography is certainly not destiny – least of all for the immensely varied boomer cohort. But boomers appear especially interesting in terms of what they might achieve in challenging traditional approaches to ageing, driven by the role of consumption, re-

sidual political radicalism, and a desire for new life styles. Boomers certainly raise challenging questions for research, and it is to be hoped that these papers will generate additional work exploring their likely impact on future patterns of growing old.

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